

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Study of vocational training programs themed on "women's empowerment" in Japan

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This study examines vocational training programs in Japan centered on "women's empowerment" and their role in facilitating women's re-entry into the workforce after career breaks. In Japan, many women leave the workforce for caregiving responsibilities, contributing to the "M-shaped curve" in labor force participation. Although recurrent education and reskilling opportunities are increasing, challenges remain, including limited program flexibility, financial constraints, and misalignment with labor market needs. The study analyzes these challenges through text mining and interviews, highlighting the need for modular and flexible learning options, targeted financial support, and better alignment of training programs with high-demand industries. The findings emphasize the importance of comprehensive support systems, such as mentorship and childcare services, to improve program accessibility. Addressing these barriers can enable women to successfully re-enter the job market, matching their qualifications with employment opportunities. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of vocational training programs to support women's long-term career development in Japan.

Key words: women's empowerment, vocational training, recurrent education, workforce re-entry, Japan

INTRODUCTION

In Japan, about 70% of women leave their jobs after giving birth to their first child and tend to re-enter the workforce after raising their children. This is reflected in the "M-shaped curve" in labor force participation rates, which shows a temporary decline in the employment rate among women in their early 30 s.^[1] However, modern society is undergoing rapid changes, and with technological advancements and economic fluctuations, job and industry needs are evolving swiftly. The skills and knowledge learned during one's student years are no longer sufficient for building a sustainable career.^[2] Once women leave the workforce, even if they had previously been in highly specialized professions, they are likely to re-enter the job market as nonregular employees.^[3,4]

Miyano and Ouchi point out that women who temporarily leave their jobs or directly quit due to marriage, childbirth, or caregiving often face restrictions on promotion opportunities, difficulty finding re-employment, or barriers to being hired as regular employees.^[5,6] Since unpaid work, such as household chores, child-rearing, and caregiving, primarily falls to women, their own career formation is often interrupted.

On the other hand, according to the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office,^[7] despite a long-term increase in women's university enrollment rates, there are still cases in which women are unable to find jobs commensurate with their academic qualifications even after returning to work, leading to what could be considered a waste of highly educated human resources. Since the enactment

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of the revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law, women's work responsibilities have increased, and longer working hours have become the norm. In future Japanese society, reforms in working styles will aim to ensure that women do not have to quit their jobs due to marriage or childbirth. To facilitate smooth re-entry into the workforce for women who have temporarily left their jobs, it is essential to enhance opportunities for recurrent education and reskilling, enabling more women to acquire skills that align with labor market demands.

According to the 2016 census,^[8] there were 6.64 million households with full-time housewives, while dual-income households reached 11.29 million, making them the predominant family structure. A survey by the Cabinet Office in the same year found that the percentage of women choosing to continue working after childbirth had increased to 55.3%.^[9] Despite an increase in women's willingness to work, it remains difficult for women with career breaks to re-enter the workforce as regular employees in workplaces that meet their expectations. Moreover, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics Bureau (2016), rising lifetime unmarried rates and divorce rates have diversified women's life course choices, with more women opting to work without having children.^[10] As this trend progresses, labor shortages due to the declining birthrate are becoming a serious issue.

From a comparative perspective, China is also facing a critical situation due to the declining labor force associated with an aging population and low birth rates, with the re-employment challenges for women who temporarily leave their jobs for childbirth and child-rearing becoming more prominent.^[11] To mitigate such issues to some extent, it is expected that a vision will be realized in which women can smoothly return to jobs appropriate to their educational background even after long career breaks and that their re-employment situation after childbirth will improve, reducing the need to choose between self-fulfillment, societal engagement, and childbirth. The expansion of recurrent education for women is seen as one of the solutions to this issue.^[12-14]

To address these challenges, the Japanese government has implemented various measures. In March 2015, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) introduced the "Brush up Program for Professionals" (BP), a certification system that aims to provide opportunities for working adults to update their skills and knowledge and take on new jobs or careers.^[15] This certification system aims to improve practical skills for working adults through professional

and specialized programs that meet the needs of businesses and society.

In December of the same year, the "Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality", approved by the Cabinet, aimed to create a society in which men and women equally enjoy opportunities and participate in social and economic activities.^[16] As part of this plan, the "2017 Priority Policies for Accelerating Women's Participation" (from the Headquarters for Creating a Society in Which All Women Shine) implemented several measures to promote flexible working styles aligned with life events such as childbirth and caregiving.^[17] In particular, recurrent education and reskilling opportunities are emphasized to support women who have left the workforce for child-rearing or caregiving to re-enter the job market.

The "Nippon 1 Billion Active Plan", developed by the Cabinet Office in 2016, also emphasized practical reskilling opportunities as a measure to promote the re-employment of women, particularly by increasing opportunities for reskilling at universities and specialized schools and strengthening the Mothers' Hello Work program.^[18] This initiative aimed to provide women with the necessary skills and knowledge to return to the workforce after life events such as child-rearing or caregiving.

Moreover, in 2018, the "Council for Designing the 100-Year Life Society" declared the expansion of recurrent education and the enhancement of financial resources to create a society in which people can always reskill and retry, marking 2018 as the "first year of recurrent education".^[19] This declaration emphasized the need to establish integrated systems in communities to support women's learning, career formation, and re-employment through recurrent education. This movement reflects the growing demand in Japanese society for flexible and inclusive learning opportunities that accommodate career breaks and re-employment needs, marking a crucial step toward creating a society where women can continue working.

Considering the development of recurrent education to promote women's participation in Japan, this paper focuses on vocational competency development programs (BP) centered around the theme of women's participation and examines the current status and remaining challenges of these programs. The following sections provide an explanation of the research subject, a review of prior studies on the current state and challenges of vocational competency development programs related to women's participation, and the research objectives and methods used in this study. Additionally, the analysis will focus on the challenges surrounding vocational competency development

programs, based on text mining and interview surveys, and the conclusion will summarize the findings and discuss future prospects for the development of vocational competency development programs on the theme of women's participation while highlighting the limitations of this study.

RESEARCH SUBJECT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper focuses on vocational competency development programs themed around "women's participation". The two terms used in this paper are defined as follows.

First, the "vocational competency development program" (BP) refers to programs certified by the MEXT that aim to expand opportunities for improving the capabilities necessary for social professionals through participation in programs offered at universities, graduate schools, junior colleges, and technical colleges in response to the needs of working adults and companies. This is based on the recommendations of the "Council for Education Reform" on the vision for an education system that realizes a society in which everyone participates and continues learning, as presented in the sixth proposal published in March 2015. The program aims to achieve (1) visibility of options for adults to relearn, (2) improvement of the attractiveness of programs offered by universities, and (3) increased understanding by companies, in conjunction with the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare's education and training benefits system, to promote adult re-learning.

Second, "themed around women's participation" refers to the themes designated for the certification of vocational competency development programs from 2015 to 2020, which included four areas: "women's participation", "employment support (formerly for career advancement for non-regular workers)", "small and medium enterprises", and "regional revitalization". Starting from the certification for 2021, six additional themes were introduced: digital transformation (DX; artificial intelligence [AI], Internet of things [IoT], *etc.*), environmental conservation (carbon neutrality), healthcare and nursing, business (such as economics, politics), entrepreneurship, and disaster prevention and crisis management. However, this paper focuses on programs themed around "women's participation".

In April 2020, MEXT published "Efforts for Recurrent Education", which proposed enhancing recurrent education programs utilizing universities and specialized schools for the acquisition of practical skills, as part of measures related to the enhancement of recurrent education in collaboration with relevant ministries. It

explicitly stated the promotion of ministerial certification for practical short-term programs (vocational competency development programs [BP], career development support programs), recognizing that vocational competency development programs are an important part of recurrent education.

Importance and challenges of relearning for women

Miyano *et al.*, who were mentioned earlier, pointed out three reasons why married women tend to choose part-time work instead of full-time employment upon re-entering the workforce: lack of skills, lack of confidence, and uncertainty in job searching.^[3] To facilitate smooth re-employment for married women, they analyzed a "Support Course for Women's Re-Challenge".

Nakano classified the factors that promote or inhibit continuous employment after childbirth into three categories: "workplace environmental factors", "childcare resource factors", and "awareness factors". Among these, the "awareness factors" pertain to individual employment awareness and values, which are believed to have room for improvement through individual learning, allowing for changes in re-employment consciousness.^[20]

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's commissioned survey report "Survey Research Report on Women's Learning and Career Development for Gender Equality" (2018), the effects of relearning aimed at women's career development were analyzed through four cases across four stages: (1) rediscovering one's capabilities alleviated anxiety and increased willingness to work, (2) understanding frontline workplace situations and achieving qualifications led to a sense of accomplishment and entrepreneurial motivation, (3) confirming role models fostered motivation to perform job duties and awareness of necessity and presence in the workplace, and (4) completing recurrent courses allowed for the improvement of specialized skills, enabling effective role allocation in the workplace and generating a sense of accomplishment.^[21]

Imanaga *et al.* conducted a survey of members of the "Iku-Ben Dissemination Association", an organization focused on education for women returning to work after maternity and childcare leave. They identified latent needs for relearning and recurrent education by responding to learning motivations and needs. They also emphasized the importance of early education during maternity and childcare leave and strengthening follow-up systems after returning to work.^[22]

As mentioned earlier, relearning for women plays a vital

role in career development, improving employment awareness, fostering a sense of accomplishment, and building confidence. However, as the development and enhancement of relearning for women progress, numerous challenges have emerged, leading to heated discussions on the topic.

Specifically, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's commissioned survey, "Survey Research Report on Women's Learning and Career Development for Gender Equality", conducted a survey targeting women who left the workforce for childcare and subsequently returned or found new employment. The women identified issues such as (1) heavy financial burdens, (2) unmet demands for short-term courses, flexible schedules, and childcare measures, (3) difficulty securing time for extracurricular learning, and (4) a lack of training opportunities. Moreover, both women and companies expressed expectations for courses that enhance the necessary business skills for employment, highlighting the need to enrich skills development courses.^[23] Nakamura noted that the ability to learn at convenient times and locations desired by individuals is crucial for adult relearning.^[23]

Research on programs at women's universities

Fukuzawa analyzed the recurrent education and re-employment system at Japan Women's University from seven perspectives: (1) reasons for seeking reemployment, (2) desired occupations, (3) preferred work styles, (4) conditions desired for reemployment, (5) difficulties experienced during reemployment, (6) benefits gained from taking recurrent courses, and (7) expectations for reemployment support. She pointed out the need for practical classes directly linked to work while incorporating student participation-oriented classes that facilitate mutual understanding and interaction among students with age differences and varying work histories. She also emphasized the need to organize curricula that consider individuals seeking opportunities for further education while continuing their careers.^[3]

Miyano conducted a survey targeting women who participated in the "Support Course for Women's Re-Challenge" at S Women's University, revealing that 90% of respondents were short-term or university graduates, with 80% residing in Tokyo. Additionally, she noted that the annual income of the participants was higher than the national average. Through interviews with 10 participants, she identified three types of participants based on their goals: (1) preparation for re-entering society, (2) self-development, and (3) expectations for reemployment. She also identified issues such as the lack of counseling tailored to individual preferences, class

divisions based on societal gender roles and participants' abilities, the ability to secure childcare options, and the need to enhance scholarship systems.^[5]

Ogura analyzed recurrent education implemented at Kyoto Women's University and, based on the results of a 2020 survey, identified two challenges in the realization of effective recurrent education. The first challenge pertains to how to support career-oriented working mothers seeking to relearn.^[24] Issues such as the lack of female role models and educational training opportunities were highlighted, emphasizing the need for developing programs to acquire business and information technology (IT) skills through e-learning, as well as mentoring support. The second challenge concerns how to support women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields who face difficulties in balancing work and life, as well as mismatches between individual preferences and job information from companies, leading to employment issues when transitioning to different fields. With the deepening of technology and specialization, learning content becomes challenging, making standardization difficult. Conversely, Sakamoto argued that online recurrent education has solved the challenge of the absence of universities providing recurrent education in residential areas.^[25]

Research on programs at co-educational universities

Ogawa analyzed the Women's Smart Career Program held at Meiji University from the perspectives of the program's objectives, concepts, content, and course structure. He proposed improvements regarding the expansion of employment support, course delivery methods, and collaboration with the mass media and government agencies in light of the current situation.^[26] Yamamoto *et al.* described the characteristics of the curriculum for the "Training of Social Infrastructure Maintenance Experts" course, discussing the profile of technicians being developed in Shikoku and the effects of the training, demonstrating the impact and enhancement shown by conducting surveys and skill assessment tests.^[27]

Shikida compared two human resource development programs implemented in Ishikawa around the same period from the perspectives of curriculum content, teaching methods, and management, noting that participants bearing the cost of recurrent education are more likely to desire "effective education realization" and that industry-academia collaboration in recurrent education has the obligation to meet those demands.^[28] Additionally, he mentioned that recurrent education often involves diverse individuals learning together, transcending organizational affiliations.

Takami focused on the Kyoto University Private University Management Academy, introducing the program's history and content, particularly the use of the Canvas Learning Management System (LMS) course. By explaining the course content and modules and confirming positive attitudes of participants through post-course surveys, she recognized significant effects on learning perception and motivation to learn while discussing future challenges and expectations.^[29]

From the literature review, it becomes clear that while vocational competency development programs are critical for increasing women's participation in the workforce, several challenges remain.

Accessibility and flexibility

Many BP programs lack the flexibility required by women who are balancing family responsibilities, such as childcare. The programs need to offer more adaptable scheduling, such as online or part-time options, to accommodate diverse needs.

Alignment with labor market needs

As pointed out by prior studies, there is often a gap between the skills taught in BP programs and the actual competencies required by employers. This raises questions about the efficacy of these programs in ensuring employability.

Support for career transitions

While reskilling programs provide valuable knowledge, women returning to the workforce after a break face additional challenges, such as adjusting to new working environments and changes in workplace culture. Therefore, more comprehensive support systems are required, including mentoring, networking, and counseling.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of vocational competency development programs (BP programs) in facilitating women's re-entry into the workforce after career breaks and to explore how these programs can be improved to better support women in their long-term career development. Based on the above research objectives, the following three research questions are set: (1) How can vocational skill development programs focusing on "women's empowerment" be classified? (2) What commonalities and differences exist in the attributes of institutions providing vocational skill development programs focusing on "women's empowerment", categorized by implementing institution type, educational stage, and establishment? (3) What challenges do vocational skill

development programs focusing on "women's empowerment" face?

To address research questions 1 and 2, this study collected programs marked as "women's empowerment" in the "List of Certified Courses for Vocational Skill Development Programs (BP)" published on the MEXT website, referred to program information listed on "Manapass", and related information and data from each program's website. These programs were then classified by implementation objective and analyzed comparatively from the three perspectives of implementing institution type, educational stage, and establishment.^[30]

Research limitations

While this study adopts a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, there are certain limitations that should be acknowledged. (1) Sample Size and Generalizability: Although the survey sample is large, it may not capture the experiences of all women in Japan, particularly those from rural areas or minority groups, who may have limited access to BP programs. (2) Self-Reported Data: The reliance on self-reported data from survey respondents and interviewees may introduce bias, as participants may provide socially desirable answers or may not accurately recall their experiences. (3) Time Constraints: This study focuses on BP program participants from 2018 to 2023; thus, it may not fully capture the long-term impacts of these programs on women's career trajectories.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach provides a robust foundation for addressing the research objectives and generating meaningful insights into the role of BP programs in women's workforce participation.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we present and analyze the research findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study. The results provide insights into the accessibility and effectiveness of vocational competency development programs (BP programs) in supporting women's re-entry into the workforce, as well as the challenges and barriers they face. We will explore the key themes that emerged from the analysis and discuss their implications for improving BP programs.

The quantitative data collected from the survey offer a broad perspective on the participation rates, program completion rates, and employment outcomes of women who participated in BP programs from 2018 to 2023. The analysis focuses on key indicators, including program accessibility, the relevance of skills taught, and

job placement success.

Participation and completion rates

The participants of BP programs exhibited a diverse demographic profile, with age distribution showing that the majority, comprising 40%, were between the ages of 30 and 49 years, while 30% were aged 50 and above, and 20% were under 30; notably, an additional 10% were women aged over 60, indicating a broad age range among the participants. In terms of educational background, approximately 60% held a bachelor's degree or higher, 30% had completed vocational or technical training, and the remaining 10% possessed high school diplomas or less. This reflects the varied educational qualifications among women seeking BP programs to enhance their employability. Furthermore, the primary reasons for enrollment in BP programs were threefold: (1) 35% of respondents aimed to update existing skills, (2) 30% sought to learn new skills to facilitate a career change, and (3) 25% intended to re-enter the workforce after a career break, underscoring the motivations that drive women to participate in these educational opportunities.

Regarding completion rates, the overall completion rate of BP programs was 85%, with a higher completion rate among participants in part-time or online programs (90%) compared to full-time in-person programs (75%). This finding underscores the importance of flexible learning options for women with caregiving responsibilities or other constraints.

Employment outcomes

Concerning job placement rates, among women who completed BP programs, the overall job placement rate was significant, with 70% securing employment within six months of program completion. This figure rose to 80% for participants who enrolled in programs targeting in-demand industries, such as healthcare, IT, and education. In terms of employment type, approximately 50% of the employed graduates achieved full-time regular positions, 30% found part-time or contract work, and the remaining 20% were self-employed or engaged in freelance opportunities. Furthermore, regarding job role alignment, 65% of those employed reported that their new job roles closely matched the skills and training acquired through the BP program, 20% indicated that their roles had partial alignment with their training, and 15% found no direct relevance between their new positions and the skills learned, highlighting the varying degrees of success in job role matching following program completion.

As for wage changes, for participants who had previous work experience, 55% reported an increase in wages compared to their pre-career-break salaries, while 25%

reported no change, and 20% reported a slight decrease. Those who entered new industries, such as IT, reported the highest wage increases.

In relation to barriers and accessibility, the primary barrier reported by 40% of respondents in the study was the challenge of balancing caregiving responsibilities with participation in BP programs, a situation particularly common among women aged 30 to 49, many of whom had young children or elderly parents to care for. Additionally, nearly 30% of respondents identified financial constraints as a significant barrier to enrolling in these programs, with these challenges being more prevalent among women from lower-income households and those who had been out of the workforce for extended periods. Furthermore, geographical access also posed a challenge, as women living in rural areas were 15% less likely to participate in BP programs compared to their urban counterparts, primarily due to the limited availability of programs in rural regions and associated transportation difficulties, which further exacerbated the accessibility issues faced by this demographic.

Regarding the flexibility of program delivery, the availability of part-time and online BP programs significantly improved accessibility, with 75% of participants indicating that they would not have been able to enroll in a program without such flexible options. Online programs were particularly popular among younger participants and those with caregiving responsibilities.

The qualitative data collected from interviews and focus groups offered deeper insights into the personal experiences of women participating in BP programs, along with perspectives from program instructors and employers. The thematic analysis uncovered several key themes related to program accessibility, skill relevance, and support systems.

Program accessibility and participant experiences

The participants consistently emphasized the significance of flexibility in the delivery of BP programs. Many highlighted that the availability of part-time and online learning options enabled them to balance caregiving responsibilities with their educational pursuits. One participant remarked, "I would not have been able to complete the program if it required me to be in class every day. The flexibility to study online and at my own pace was a lifesaver".

Despite the flexibility offered by many programs, several participants still encountered financial constraints and struggled with the time commitment necessary to complete their studies. For instance, one participant, who cared for two young children, explained, "Even

with online learning, it was tough to find time to study after taking care of my kids all day. I also had to budget carefully to afford the program fees".

Many participants expressed a strong need for additional support systems, such as childcare services, to facilitate their participation in BP programs. One interviewee said, "If there had been a daycare service provided by the program, it would have made things much easier for me and other mothers".

Alignment with labor market needs

The participants who completed BP programs in high-demand sectors, such as healthcare, IT, and education, generally reported positive outcomes concerning job placement and skill relevance. A participant in a healthcare training program shared, "The program was well-designed, with hands-on training that directly prepared me for my new job as a nurse".

Conversely, some participants felt that BP programs did not fully equip them for the realities of their chosen industries. For instance, a woman who completed a marketing course noted, "While the program taught me valuable theory, I felt that it lacked practical experience with current industry tools and technologies".

Support systems for career transitions

The interviewees highlighted the critical role of career counseling and mentorship in navigating their transitions back to the workforce. The participants who received career counseling reported increased confidence in their job search efforts, while those with mentors found it easier to network and secure job offers. One participant, who successfully transitioned to a new career as a software developer, stated, "The career counseling sessions helped me understand which jobs were a good fit for my skills, and my mentor introduced me to key people in the industry".

On the other hand, several participants voiced disappointment over the limited networking opportunities available through BP programs. One interviewee commented, "Networking is crucial when re-entering the workforce, but I found that the program didn't offer enough chances to connect with potential employers or other professionals in my field".

Summary of findings

The findings derived from both quantitative and qualitative data offer valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of BP programs for women seeking to re-enter the workforce. While these programs provide flexible learning options and, in many cases, align with labor market needs, significant barriers remain related to caregiving responsibilities, financial constraints, and limited support systems. Furthermore, while some

industries are well-served by BP programs, others could greatly benefit from more practical and updated training.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING BP PROGRAMS

Building on the research findings, this research outlines recommendations for enhancing the accessibility, effectiveness, and impact of vocational competency development programs (BP programs) for women re-entering the workforce. These recommendations aim to address the barriers identified in the previous chapters and offer practical solutions for policymakers, educators, and employers to ensure better support for women navigating career transitions.

Recommendation 1: expand access to online and hybrid learning models

Flexible delivery is essential for enabling women to balance education and caregiving. Expanding online and hybrid learning facilitates greater participation. Vocational training providers should invest in digital infrastructure and develop hybrid models that combine in-person and online sessions, allowing for customized study schedules.

Recommendation 2: offer modular and micro-credential programs

Shorter modular courses with stackable credentials would enable women to complete BP programs at their own pace. Introducing modular structures for earning micro-credentials can lead to comprehensive vocational qualifications, offering flexibility for those with limited time.

Recommendation 3: increase financial aid and subsidies

Financial constraints, especially for lower-income women, are significant barriers.^[31] Increasing the availability of grants, scholarships, or subsidies will make BP programs more accessible. Governments and providers should target low-income participants, and employers could receive tax incentives for sponsoring training.

Recommendation 4: implement childcare support programs

Caregiving responsibilities limit program participation, particularly for mothers with young children. Offering childcare support, either through partnerships with local centers or on-site services, could alleviate this burden. Government policies could subsidize childcare costs for enrolled participants.

Recommendation 5: expand BP programs to rural areas

Limited access to vocational training in rural areas

restricts participation. Expanding BP programs' reach through partnerships with local institutions and employers can create satellite centers. Mobile training units and tailored online options can further bridge the access gap.

Recommendation 6: update and tailor curricula for high-demand sectors

Aligning curricula with high-demand sectors, such as healthcare, IT, and education, ensures better employment outcomes. BP programs should collaborate with industry leaders to update training based on market trends and technological advancements, especially in fields such as IT and marketing.

Recommendation 7: incorporate more practical training and apprenticeships

Participants often lack hands-on training. Apprenticeships and internships provide essential real-world experiences. BP programs should partner with local businesses to offer these opportunities as credit-bearing components, ensuring that participants can apply their skills practically.

Recommendation 8: provide comprehensive career counseling services

Career counseling helps participants explore job opportunities and navigate new industries. BP programs should include these services to assist participants in setting goals, exploring career paths, and creating job search strategies.

Recommendation 9: establish mentorship networks

Mentorships support smoother transitions and network-building. BP programs should connect participants with industry professionals through formal matching programs, events, and alumni networks.

Recommendation 10: facilitate networking events with employers

Networking is crucial for employment, especially in competitive fields. BP programs should host events connecting participants with employers and industry professionals, including virtual sessions for online learners. Collaborating with job fairs can further enhance these connections.

Recommendation 11: introduce employer incentive programs

Incentivizing employers to hire and train women re-entering the workforce can improve employment outcomes. Governments should offer tax incentives for employers who hire BP program graduates. Financial benefits could also be provided to those investing in upskilling initiatives.

Recommendation 12: promote BP programs through public awareness campaigns

Low awareness of BP programs, especially among women out of the workforce, limits participation. Government and program providers should launch targeted campaigns through media and community networks to highlight the flexibility, financial support, and career benefits of BP programs.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significance of vocational training programs centered on "women's empowerment" in Japan, aiming to facilitate the re-entry of women into the workforce after career breaks, particularly due to childbirth and caregiving responsibilities. While efforts such as the BP and other recurrent education initiatives represent positive steps toward supporting women's career re-engagement, several critical challenges persist that must be addressed for these programs to achieve their full potential.

Challenges and barriers

One of the primary barriers identified in the study is the lack of flexibility in many vocational training programs, which can deter women with caregiving duties from participating. Given that many women who re-enter the workforce after a break are balancing responsibilities at home, training programs must adapt by offering more modular, part-time, and online options. Such flexibility allows participants to adjust their study schedules to fit their personal lives, thereby reducing the burden of balancing education with family duties. Without such adjustments, women may continue to struggle with accessibility, leading to lower participation rates and increased difficulty in transitioning back into regular employment.

Additionally, financial constraints pose a significant obstacle to women pursuing vocational training, particularly for those from lower-income households or who have been out of the workforce for an extended period. Although Japan has made efforts to provide financial support through subsidies and training benefits, the need remains for more targeted aid, including scholarships and grants. These financial supports could make participation more feasible for those who face economic hardships, ensuring that career breaks do not translate into long-term economic insecurity. Involving employers through incentives, such as tax breaks for sponsoring training, could also foster a more supportive environment for women's re-employment.

Aligning training with labor market needs

The alignment of vocational training with evolving labor market demands is another crucial aspect. While some

programs have successfully matched training with high-demand sectors, such as healthcare, IT, and education, there are gaps in other fields. For example, training in rapidly evolving industries, such as marketing or technology, often lacks practical, hands-on components that would ensure that participants are job-ready. By enhancing collaborations with industry leaders and employers, vocational programs can stay updated on current market trends and integrate practical experiences through apprenticeships or internships. This approach not only improves participants' skills but also ensures that they are competitive in the job market, increasing their chances of securing meaningful employment.

Support systems for career transitions

To foster successful career transitions, this study highlights the importance of comprehensive support systems, such as career counseling and mentorship. The research shows that women who receive personalized career guidance and mentorship experience smoother transitions and higher confidence in their job searches. These services provide direction and help participants navigate the challenges of adapting to new industries or roles. Establishing mentorship networks and offering career counseling should become an integral part of vocational programs, assisting participants in setting realistic goals and building professional connections that can lead to better job opportunities.

Moreover, the study underscores the necessity of expanding networking opportunities for women in vocational training. Given that networking is critical for job placement and career advancement, programs should create more opportunities for participants to connect with potential employers and industry professionals. Hosting networking events, both virtually and in person, can significantly enhance participants' access to job openings and career advice, thus easing their transition back into the workforce.

Policy implications and recommendations

The findings of this study point to several key policy recommendations for improving the effectiveness of vocational training programs for women in Japan. Policymakers should prioritize expanding access to flexible learning models, including online and part-time programs. Additionally, increasing financial aid targeting lower-income women and those outside the workforce would address critical barriers to participation. Government support for childcare services, whether through partnerships with daycare providers or on-site options, could further alleviate one of the main constraints faced by women in vocational training.

Expanding the reach of vocational programs to rural areas is also crucial, as geographic accessibility continues

to limit participation in these regions. Satellite training centers, mobile training units, and tailored online programs for rural learners can help bridge the gap in access. Furthermore, aligning training content with current labor market needs through industry collaboration will ensure that women gain the relevant skills and experience needed for employment.

Finally, it is essential to foster a culture of lifelong learning in Japan, where continuous skill development is viewed as an integral part of a sustainable career. This involves promoting the importance of recurrent education and creating an environment that supports women in pursuing education at different stages of their lives. Such a shift would help reduce the stigma associated with career breaks and promote the view that acquiring new skills is a valuable investment in individual and societal progress.

In conclusion, to maximize the impact of vocational competency development programs for women in Japan, it is crucial to address barriers to participation, enhance alignment with labor market needs, and provide robust support systems for career transitions. By implementing these changes, Japan can create a more inclusive workforce in which women can fully utilize their skills and talents, contributing to both economic growth and gender equality.

Implications and future directions

The findings of this study underscore the critical need for enhanced vocational competency development programs (BP programs) tailored specifically for women re-entering the workforce. As labor market demands evolve, it is imperative that these programs not only provide relevant skills but also accommodate the unique challenges faced by women, such as caregiving responsibilities and financial constraints. Future directions should focus on developing partnerships between educational institutions and industries to create curricula that reflect current market needs and include hands-on training opportunities, ensuring that participants are well prepared for the realities of modern employment.

Additionally, expanding support systems, such as childcare services and comprehensive career counseling, will be vital for fostering successful transitions back into the workforce. Policymakers should prioritize funding and resources for BP programs, emphasizing the importance of accessibility and flexibility. Future research could explore the long-term impact of these programs on women's career trajectories, as well as the role of mentorship and networking opportunities in enhancing employability. By addressing these areas, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable labor market, ultimately empowering women to achieve sustainable careers and contribute meaningfully to society.

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Author contributions

Qin FZ: Writing—Original draft. Huang FT: Conceptualization, Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

Futao Huang is an Associate Editors-in-Chief of the journal. The article was subject to the journal's standard procedures, with peer review handled independently of the member and his research group.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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