

Inclusive Career Development for Women in Transition: Struggles and Empowerment in Japan

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Abstract

Japan faces a declining birthrate and rapid population aging. Consequently, women are increasingly expected to participate in the workforce. However, many women still struggle to build sustainable careers because of barriers such as domestic violence, caregiving responsibilities, and unstable employment. We have worked at gender equality centers, publicly funded centers that promote gender equality in Japan, where we have supported women navigating complex life transitions. This paper introduces two representative cases: a woman recovering from domestic violence and a woman struggling to rebuild her career after years of caregiving and unstable employment. Based on these cases, we found that job-search assistance alone was often insufficient. Long-term career counseling, post-employment support, and a one-year career seminar program incorporating peer support emerged as particularly valuable forms of support. Women facing complex barriers should be able to access this form of support regardless of where they live. Accordingly, we continue to advocate for enhanced training for career counselors and collaboration with local governments.

Women in Transition in Japan

In Japan, declining birthrates and rapid population aging have increased expectations for women's participation in the workforce. However, substantial gender gaps remain in wages and leadership opportunities. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024), Japan ranked 118th out of 148 countries.

Gender equality centers (GECs) have been established throughout Japan to promote gender equality and provide integrated support (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2024). As career counselors working in GECs, we have supported many women who say, "I want to work, but I cannot," or "I do not have a career." In our experience, job-search assistance alone is often insufficient. Career concerns may emerge in the context of domestic violence, caregiving responsibilities, financial insecurity, loss of confidence, communication difficulties, or social isolation.

What types of support are needed for women experiencing these complex barriers? In this paper, we report on two practice-based approaches: (1) long-term career counseling and post-employment support and (2) a one-year career seminar program incorporating peer support.

Representative Cases

The following two cases reflect circumstances commonly encountered among women receiving support at GECs. Both women wished to work but encountered complex barriers.

Mari: Long-Term Career Counseling

Mari was a woman in her forties raising two children after leaving an abusive marriage. Like many women affected by domestic violence, she experienced emotional distress, low self-confidence, and anxiety about the future. Immediate job-search support was not feasible.

Rather than waiting for complete recovery, Mari gradually rebuilt her confidence through manageable employment experiences, beginning with reduced working hours and part-time employment. Because women recovering from domestic violence may unconsciously recreate patterns of dominance and submission in workplace relationships, support continued after they obtained employment. Mari received long-term career counseling over approximately three years, including post-employment support.

Emi: A One-Year Career Seminar Program

Emi was a woman who had spent years caring for her mother while moving between unstable jobs. Like many women in the seminar, she belonged to Japan's "Employment Ice Age" generation (Yoshikawa, 2021) and had gradually lost confidence in herself and her future.

Emi participated in a one-year career seminar program developed at our center. During the first half of the program, the focus was on rebuilding confidence and facilitating emotional recovery. Because many participants had experienced emotional harm, career counselors actively created a psychologically safe environment wherein

trust gradually developed. In the second half of the program, career planning and employment preparation became more meaningful.

Practice-Based Career Support

The support approaches introduced in this paper were developed gradually through practical experience. In particular, the one-year career seminar program was refined over three rounds of implementation based on participants' experiences and needs.

Three-Step Career Counseling Process

Based on long-term counseling cases such as Mari's, we found that women facing complex barriers often required support beyond immediate job-search assistance.

Step 1: Recovery and Safety. In the early stages, emotional recovery and rebuilding a sense of safety were often priorities. One strength of GECs was the ability to collaborate with legal professionals and domestic violence specialists as needed. This integrated support helped women stabilize their lives before pursuing employment became feasible.

Step 2: Rebuilding Confidence Through Small Steps. Rather than waiting for complete recovery, women gradually rebuilt confidence through manageable work experiences and small successes. Even reduced working hours or part-time work often helped restore confidence, independence, and hope.

Step 3: Employment and Post-Employment Support. Securing employment did not mark the end of the support process. Career counselors supported women in maintaining healthy workplace relationships, including coaching in communication skills such as setting boundaries and saying "no" when necessary. Continued counseling helped women sustain employment over time.

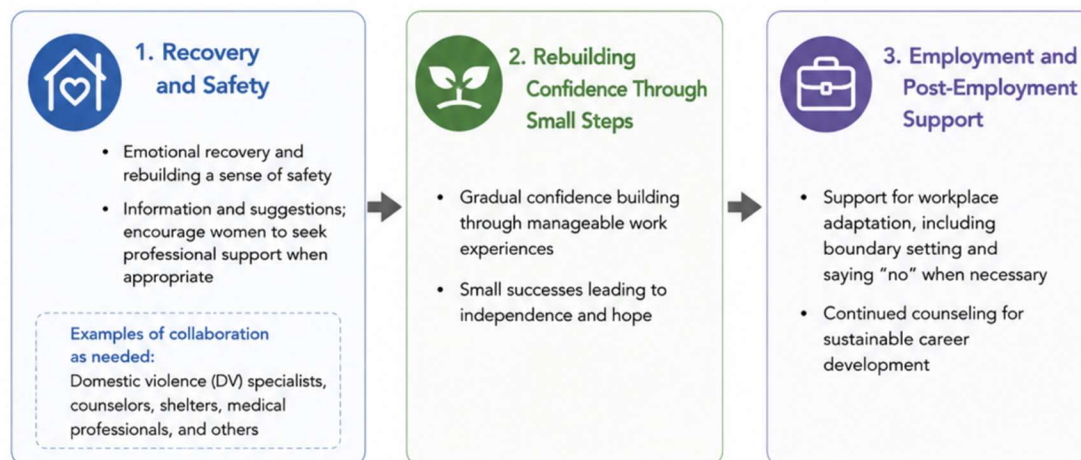


Figure 1. *Three-Step Career Counseling Process*

One-Year Career Seminar Program

From cases such as Emi's, we also learned the importance of long-term group-based support. Unlike conventional employment programs, the seminar incorporated assertiveness training, stress-coping strategies, communication skills, peer support, and career planning.

During the first half of the program, the focus was on emotional recovery and rebuilding confidence in a psychologically safe environment. Because many participants had experienced emotional harm and developed strong self-protective behaviors, career counselors played an active role in fostering trust and constructive group dynamics. In the second half of the program, career planning and employment preparation became more meaningful. While seeking employment, many women experienced personal growth and recovery.

Rather than viewing employment as the ultimate goal, the program aimed to help women acquire the basic skills needed to develop and sustain their careers independently after the support period ended.

Implications for Inclusive Career Development and Social Justice

Our experience suggests that employment itself should not be viewed as the final goal of career support for women experiencing complex barriers. Their lives continue beyond the conclusion of counseling. Career support should therefore help women build the confidence, coping skills, and self-understanding needed to sustain their careers independently over time. However, this form of long-term and gender-informed support is still not widely available in Japan. Many career support programs are evaluated based on short-term outcomes, such as the speed with which participants obtain employment. Consequently, deeper recovery processes and long-term career development may receive relatively limited attention.

Women facing domestic violence, caregiving responsibilities, unstable employment, or structural disadvantages often encounter barriers beyond their individual control. From a social justice perspective, access to meaningful and appropriate career support should not

depend on where a woman lives or which helping site she happens to visit.



Figure 2. One-Year Career Seminar Program for Women Experiencing Complex Barriers

Career support should strengthen women's confidence, sense of control, and career adaptability rather than simply help them secure employment (Savickas, 2013).

In some GECs, including our own, practitioners may have greater flexibility to provide longer-term and integrated support. We believe that expanding such practices will require enhanced gender-informed training for career counselors. Expanding such practices will also require advocacy directed at local governments to improve the quality and continuity of support available through GECs. Increasing the number of practitioners and centers capable of providing this form of support remains an important future challenge.

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