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The Japanese Family Faces 21st-Century Challenges

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Family-related issues are at the forefront of social challenges facing Japan: women are postponing marriage, the birth rate is falling, the divorce rate rising, teenage girls are dating middle-aged men to earn money to buy luxury goods, young men are finding it difficult to attract wives, and the percentage of the elderly is growing rapidly and their care is a major social problem. Japanese leaders are lamenting the breakdown of the Japanese family system or seeking to develop policies to shore up that system.

Background

The development of the Japanese family was a cornerstone of the formation of the Japanese state in the late nineteenth century.¹ The low position of Japanese women was among the various criteria the West used to declare Japan a backward society, and the Meiji state (1868–1912) developed an ideology centered on the importance of educating women to be good wives and wise mothers.²

The legal code and ideology of the Meiji state defined the Japanese family as: patriarchal, with the role of each member well-defined by age, gender, and relationship to the patriarchal head. Children were raised according to their roles. Eldest sons were treated as future heads of family, served after their father and before their younger brothers; daughters were last because they would one day marry out of the family. The bride's position was lowest of all. This family became the foundation of social stability and order as Japan moved from the nineteenth century into and through the Pacific War.

After the War, during the Occupation, new laws were enacted and marriage became a union between two consenting adults. Inheritance and responsibility for caring for parents was to be divided equally among all children.

As Japan moved into the 1960s and its period of double-digit economic growth, new family forms developed. However the assumption remained that the happiness of a woman lay in marriage and that the role of married women was to be good wives and wise mothers.

Economic growth and industrial development led to an increase in salaried workers, a minority of whom had "permanent" (until retirement) jobs. These men were excellent candidates for marriage. The path to obtaining one of these plum positions was education. As competition increased, education became even more important. The salaryman's wife was an important part of corporate Japan; as her role took on new dimensions, it required the commitment of a profession.³ As wife, her duty was to manage the household and its finances so that her husband could come home and relax to be energized for the next day's work. As mother, her duty increasingly focused on getting her children through the education system, and the phenomenon of the "education

mother" was born. Indeed, it has been argued that corporate Japan found the ideology of the Japanese family system and its division of labor a very convenient base for motivating men (as husbands/fathers) to put in long hours.

The economic growth and industrialization of Japan impacted gender roles. Education (through junior college when possible) became increasingly important for women who wanted to attract a salaryman husband. Once married, women were available to do piece work in the home, and their cheap labor provided the foundation for Japan's industrial development.⁴ Men's jobs took them outside the neighborhood and local community, which resulted in separate social networks for husbands and wives, and over time the necessity and opportunity for women to take on community responsibility.

As this hard-working salaryman family moved into the second generation, a variation appeared that was called the new family⁵ in Japanese. This new family was based on the belief that husbands and wives should be companions and have shared interests.

In the 1980s, Japan signed the United Nations Declaration on Women and consequently passed the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law that opened more job opportunities to women. This law was merely advisory: it had no penalties for non-compliance and no affirmative action components. In theory, men and women have equal opportunity in both tracks. In practice, the majority of women are in routine work and virtually all managerial track positions are held by men.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of trends became noticeable: women were marrying later and later; the birth rate was falling; Japanese men were increasingly seen as undesirable husbands and as problems when they grew older.

Throughout this period, as Japan became increasingly aware that its society was rapidly aging, the government called on women to carry out three key missions: to bear children, care for the aged, and fill the needs of the shrinking labor force. Women resisted not with protests and marches, but by changing their behavior or by quiet noncompliance.

Resistance and New Patterns

One of the most striking behavior changes reflects the fact that marriage is becoming less and less attractive to Japanese women. Sexual mores are also changing. One example is young girls dating older men for money. When interviewed, the girls say there is nothing wrong with what they are doing. If anyone is wrong, they say, it is the older men who pay for their services.

In fact, pregnancy seems to have become a recognized catalyst for marriage. The term *dekichatta kon*, (marriage after the child is conceived) is in common usage, even in commercials. Media reports the availability of maternity wedding dresses and according to Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Labor statistics released in March 2002, 26.3 percent of brides are pregnant.⁶

Why is marriage so unattractive to Japanese women? One reason is that women have other options for economic security: employment. Another is the difficulty of combining family and career in Japan today because of the Japanese employment system and the expectation of total commitment of worker to company. Yet another important reason is the legacy of the Japanese family system, including care for the aged, the burden of which falls on women.

The Japanese government has begun to recognize that systemic change is necessary to prevent population decline. The Revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law that went into effect in 1998 aims at improving the employment environment so that working women are not discriminated against, can make full use of their abilities and skills, and can feel free to have children while continuing to work. Changes in the Labor Standards Law are also family-friendly and gender-equal.

In a time of economic stagnation, the true effect of the above legislation is difficult to see. Although the above-mentioned laws protect women, companies may pressure women on maternity leave to resign because their jobs must be cut as part of “restructuring”.⁷

Child Care

Although many Japanese are legally entitled to take up to a year’s Childcare Leave with guaranteed re-employment and financial compensation of 40% of the salary during the leave (10% is paid when the employee returns to work), relatively few take it. There is increasing concern that informal pressure in the work place encourages women to resign after childbirth rather than depend on others to do “her work” while she is on childcare leave and it is particularly difficult for men (less than 1% currently take this leave) to take advantage of this without worrying about their future careers. As part of a new government policy to combat the declining birthrate, the Japanese Government has enacted new legislation that requires local governments and large companies (over 300 employees) to draft concrete measures for attaining the target of 80% of women and 10% of men taking Childcare Leave. This new policy is entitled the Plus One Proposal to End the Low Birthrate.

Divorce

An interesting trend is the growing number of divorces after 20 years of marriage. Once their children are raised, these women want to retire, just as their husbands are retiring. They, however, want to retire from housekeeping, caring for their husband, caring for his aged parents, and someday caring for him. They thus reject many of what were considered women’s most important roles.

Care for the Aged

Changes in demographics, the family, and the role of women mean that care of the aged by the eldest son and his wife is no

longer a viable model for Japan. With the vast increase in the number of senior citizen households, there is less consensus as to who should provide care.

The changes in the Japanese family have led to increasing demand for men to cross the boundaries of conventional gender roles by caring for elderly parents and spouses.⁸ Care for the aged, a responsibility that cannot be avoided or postponed, may provide the best insight into change and continuity in the Japanese family, gender roles, and the role of the family versus the state.

Conclusion

What we are seeing is a diversification of patterns, from a single desirable model (the “Japanese family system”) to a range of socially acceptable choices. Young people quietly but firmly reject many assumptions of the generation ruling Japan. They look for greater flexibility in work and family, including care for the elderly. Yet Japan clearly has not developed solutions that adequately meet goals set by its own government: to focus on men’s and women’s roles and how to balance child care, elder care and work.

Notes

¹. For a discussion of this, see Liddle, Joanna, and Sachiko Nakajima. *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters*. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000).

². Liddle and Nakajima, op.cit., 32–39.

³. See Vogel, Suzanne H., “Professional Housewife: The Career of Urban Middle Class Japanese Women”. *Japan Interpreter* 12 (1) 1978: 16–43.

⁴. See Brinton, Mary C., *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993)

⁵. English words written in Japanese phonetic script.

⁶. Curtin, J. Sean. “Japanese Marriage Trends in 2002: Later Unions and More Diverse Families” October 3, 2002, www.glocom.org/special_topics/social_trends/20021003_trends_s9/

⁷. Nihon Keizai Shinbun. “Shigoto to Ikiru,” (Japan Economic News) January 6, 2003.

⁸. Long, Susan Orpett, and Phyllis Braudy Harris “Gender and Elder Care: Social Change and the Role of the Caregiver in Japan.” *Social Science Japan Journal*, April 2000; Vol. 3, Issue 1. 21–36.

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