
Who Killed the Model Family?

Unintended Consequence of Work and Family Policies in Japan

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Economic Argument of Gender Equality

It has been four years since the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launched the ambitious plan to revitalize Japan's economy, publicly known as "Abenomics." The plan consisted of three parts, metaphorically called three "arrows": aggressive monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and a series of structural reforms known as strategies for economic growth. Abe declared that the key component of the third arrow, the structural reform, would focus on women to enhance economic growth by encouraging participation and advancement of women in the Japanese workforce.

"Women have the greatest potential, and *allowing* them to demonstrate their full abilities is the core of our growth strategy," reported *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (July 14, 2014). The Growth Strategy initially was reported to use "full-utilization of women" (*josei no katuyou*) as a key word, but having realized its political *incorrectness*, they secretly revised it to "women being more active" (*josei no katsuyaku*) or a "society where women shine" (*josei no kagaku shakai*). Readers may notice the sexist bias embedded in these words; nobody has to have permission for fully developing one's potential and nobody wants to be objectified or "utilized" by someone else. Apart from these

wordings, the main point of the role of women discussed in the planned economic growth strategy is to persuade more Japanese women to join the workforce, to remain in the workforce, and to advance higher on the career ladder.

The development of Abe's initiative has since lead to the enactment of the "Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace" in 2016¹. The act aims to encourage women's participation in the economy and obliges companies with 301 or more employees as well as central and local government to collect and disclose their data, such as work hours and tenure disaggregated by gender, and rate of female managers. It also stipulates these organizations to set numerical targets and plans to improve gender equality.

Narrowing the gender gap has finally become a serious political agenda and a vital source of economic growth for Japan. It is also hoped to be a solution for the long-term demographic problem of fertility decline and aging of the society.

¹ As with the case of gender-related policies and programs in Japan, such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law discussed later in this article, this act does not have any penalty code.

Is the economic argument for closing the gender gap viable? Will it change the Japanese labor structures, employment practices, and government policies which are known to be the strongest “male breadwinner system” among the advanced industrialized countries. Will Abenomics really empower women and break the “glass ceiling” that has long been said to be made not of glass but of concrete? From what has been observed of the Japanese gender structure for the last thirty years through a series of family policies and reforms, I have to be skeptical about the effectiveness of turning to women as a solution to the complex social problems that Japan is facing: fertility decline, labor shortage, and breakdown of social security.

This article demonstrates the prototype of Womenomics and the effects of the family and labor policies in Japan since the 1980s. Of particular interest are the consequences of the discourse on the “Japanese-type Welfare System” and the inconsistent family policies that ignored gender relation and thus undermined the reproductive capabilities of society as a whole.

Gender Inequality in Japan

The economic argument on closing the gender gap is nothing new but has been circulated for about three decades. The arguments contend that mobilizing the “underutilized” female human capital will serve to revitalize the economy. For many Japanese these claims come with a sense of déjà vu. For example, a quarter of a century ago, in 1992, Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa announced a Cabinet Decision Report titled “Five-Year Plan for a Consumer-conscious Society.” He eagerly emphasized the necessity for women’s full participation and called for structural reforms as follows.

“It is vital to improve [sic] social environment where every citizen of the nation can participate and contribute to the society according to their own capabilities. Of particular importance is to allow women to fully and actively participate in society. For this aim, we must re-examine the social institutions, practices, and customs including the fixed gender role attitudes, so that we can implement a gender equal society.” (Economic Planning Agency, 1992 p. 8) (Underline by author)

Reading this passage, one must be astounded by the similarities of the rhetoric and terminology with that of Abe's initiatives: that it calls for gender equality for economic growth, that full participation of women is necessary, and that it emphasizes the need to restructure the gender role practices that hinder the change. The similarities of the discourse exemplify how *little* has changed in Japan in terms of gender gap over the last two decades.

According to the *Global Gender Gap Report 2016* by the World Economic Forum, Japan ranked 111th out of 144 countries (World Economic Forum, 2016), below Nepal (110), Ethiopia (109) and Malaysia (106) and just above Cambodia (112). What is more disappointing is that Japan's rank has slid *down* from 94th in 2010. In the areas of education and health, Japan ranks almost at the top; more than half of the girls enroll in higher education and Japanese women enjoy the highest longevity in the world. When it comes to economic participation and political representation, however, Japanese women lag far behind the rest of the world. In the area of political empowerment Japan ranks at 103rd, and in the area of economic participation and opportunity, Japan ranks at 118th.

Japanese women are quite visible in the labor market. Women consist of 45% of employed workers in Japan (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, MHLW 2016) . The gender wage gap,

however, is one of the worst among the OECD countries. Women earn about 27% less than men do (OECD 2016) and this makes Japan the third worst country among the OECD countries in gender wage gap. Moreover, this figure reported in OECD data is alarmingly underestimated because it only compares full-time wages of men and women, excluding the wages of more than half of women (54.7%) who work part-time. Women occupy only 3% of the top managerial positions, the second smallest among the developed countries next to Korea (OECD 2016). Japanese women represent only 9.5% in the House of Representatives (Cabinet Office 2016) when the world average is 22.9% (IPU 2016). The low political representation of Japanese women ranks Japan 162nd among 188 countries for women's political leadership as reported by Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2014). In many of the international gender indices, Korea and Japan used to be tied at the end of the scale, but in a short time, Korea surpassed Japan by adopting a quota system to increase female representation in politics and by electing a women president (though impeached in December 2016). Meanwhile in Japan, having only five women appointed to Abe's new Cabinet made big news (Asahi Shimbun September 4, 2014).

The Ideology of the Japanese-Style Welfare System

The persistent gender gap in Japan is, in a sense, the inevitable consequence of the post-war policies that amalgamated corporate society (market economy) and private sphere (family) based on the traditional gender regime (Hirao 2015). To achieve the national goal of “catching-up” on economic advancement the productive labor and the reproductive labor was assigned according to the comparative advantage by the conventional gender roles. This coordinated capitalism (Nemoto 2016) allowed the state to free ride on the institution of family and women’s unpaid work for production of the future labor force (upbringing of children) and for provision of care work for the dependent, the sick, and the elderly. On the other hand lifelong employment provided for the core sector of labor market (namely full-time male workers), seniority system, and generous corporate fringe benefit afforded security for the family management.

Although Japanese political leaders are known to show little interest in developing an expensive interventionist welfare state, Japan has established quite a generous social security system in the 1960s that includes universal public health coverage, universal pension system, and high quality, publicly subsidized, childcare system. When Japan was hit by two oil crises in the 1970s,

the government realized that it could no longer bear the cost of maintaining the welfare system particularly in providing sound care for the aging population. So rhetoric was developed to get around the problem; the capacity of families was exaggerated and it was decided to rely on families as inexpensive sources of care.

This position was formalized in 1979 when the ruling Liberal Democratic Party under Prime Minister Ohira released a Cabinet Decision Report titled *Seven-Year Plan on New Social Economy* (Shin keizai shakai nana kanen keikaku) (Economic Planning Agency, 1979). The report states that “Japan has achieved high economic development and has caught up with the European advanced countries (p.4)” and that “it must create a new Japanese-style Welfare Society that utilizes the socio-economic characteristics represented by the hard work-ethics of its citizens and high social mobility”. The socio-economic characteristic of Japan rests in the family. Unlike Western Societies, the Japanese family has a robust foundation for providing care to the elderly with the strong norm of co-residence with elderly parents at least when they are frail and in need of care (p.7-9).

The report does not mention a specific country when it refers to the “Western Societies” but it is used as a reference point that shows the strength of the Japanese society. That is, instead of

establishing an expensive European style welfare state with institutional care, the government decided to rely on families to take responsibility for caring for the elderly at home. The notion of Japanese-style Welfare System set the direction of the family policy for the following decades.

It wasn't until the late 1980s that demographic transition was seriously taken as the key factor affecting the family structure when family sociologists began to realize that the norm of co-residence with elderly parents was made possible and coexisted with the new ideal of nuclear families only through a demographic coincidence; the cohort who formed families during 1955-1975 had a larger number of surviving siblings than any other cohort in Japanese history (e.g. Ochiai 1994). In this sense, the Japanese-style Welfare Society was nothing but an ideology and evocations of the past ideal whether real or mythical (Campbell 1992). Nevertheless, it was well circulated among political circles and the public as a justification to rely on families and individuals and less on state for welfare and care.

Today, few politicians talk about the Japanese-style Welfare System, but throughout the 1980s, the Japanese family policy was haunted by this reliance on the mythical image of the "traditional" Japanese family structure and practices until the government realized that Japan is not

having a sufficient number of children to replace its population.

Baby Strike and the Latent Function of Gender Inequality

Fertility decline became a serious political issue when the government announced in 1990 that the birth rate of the previous year was 1.57. This figure made news because it was lower than 1.58 of the Fire-Horse (*hinouma*) year of 1966 when people deliberately refrained from having babies from the superstitious fear that girls born in this zodiac year would bring bad luck to their future husbands. Until this "1.57 Shock," Japanese family and labor policy assumed the stability of Japanese families. In fact, until then, the marriage rate remained high and the divorce rate was relatively low. Although the birth rate was already below replacement level, the arrival of the bulky cohort of second baby boomers in the early 1970s obscured the looming problems of an aging society.

Under these assumptions, family and labor policies in the 1980s were composed of different sets of policy packages: one aimed at the promotion of gender equality in the workplace, and the other at the deregulation of hiring practices and reinforced gender segregation in the labor

market. The first set of policies was managed under the direction of the Ministry of Welfare, and the second under the direction of the Ministry of Labor. By the time the two ministries were integrated in 1999 as the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), the family-related policies began to converge as measures to curb the decline in fertility.

In response to the “1.57 shock,” the Japanese government took a number of measures against the birthrate decline by creating new laws and policy plans. A few examples include the “Child Care and Family Care Leave Act” (1991); “Angel Plan” (1995-99); the “New Angel Plan” (2000-2004); and “Measures Plan on Support for Next Generation” (2003-), coined as “new-new Angel Plan”; and a new comprehensive support system for children and child-rearing (2014); as well as a work-style reform to address the work-and-family conflict (2015).

As of this writing, however, none of the policies or programs seem to have served to achieve the goal. Why? It is because the government policies have not challenged the overarching mainstream framework that supported the male breadwinner system². First, the

government initiative to promote gender equality accompanied policies that make gender inequality latently functional. Gender discrimination in the work place was *de jure* prohibited by the “Equal Employment Opportunity Law” (EEO), which was enacted in 1985. In the same year, however, a pension reform plan was introduced that favors the breadwinner system. This plan gave “dependent spouses” (mostly women) with less than 1.3 million yen the right towards a basic pension without having to contribute a pension premium. It was an extension to the existing tax privilege for dependent spouses with an income of less than 1.03 million yen. Although, this threshold of tax exemption is expected to be revised to 1.5 million yen in 2017, it will still serve as a negative incentive for the spouses to earn more. In other words, if her income exceeds this threshold - whether 1.3 million yen or 1.5 million yen - the gross household income would be higher, and thus, higher taxes, pension premium, social security tax, would apply, which in effect would decrease the net household income. In addition her husband could also no longer claim a tax-exemption for “supporting” his spouse. These

translation of the original Japanese of the Gender Equality Bureau (男女共同参画局) to English, for example, should read “Bureau for Men and Women Joint Participation”.

2 The government has craftily avoided to use the term “gender equality,” substituting it with the word “joint participation.” The literal

privileges given to a dependent spouse encourage women to limit their labor supply. In other words, the policy subsidizes breadwinner-homemaker families at the expense of families in which both husband and wife work full-time.

Second, in ostensible promotion of family-friendliness in the workplace, the government encouraged businesses to provide “varied and flexible employment opportunities” and passed the “Worker Dispatch Law” in 1985, again the same year EEOL was enacted. This law was originally designed to regulate the extra-legal system of subcontractor personnel dispatching, but in reality it invited expansion of temporary workers in the Japanese labor market. The “flexible” employment opportunities, which had long been adopted by married women as coping strategies to balance work and family responsibilities, began to be used more openly to provide a pool of cheap and disposable work force for businesses wanting to minimize labor costs. In fact, it served to strengthen the dual labor market that overlaps gender segregation in the work place.

According to the Labor Force Survey, the proportion of part-time workers³ among female workers has increased from 9.6 % in 1965 to 56%

³ Part-time workers are defined as those working less than 35 hours a week.

in 2016 (MHLW 2016). While flexibility may be an advantage of part-time work, the disadvantages include lower hourly wages, ineligibility for fringe benefits, and restricted career prospects. The most serious disadvantage is that they are *de facto* excluded from receiving maternity and parental leave and other family-friendly benefits⁴. In other words, while the government requires large firms to encourage their employees to take parental leave, the structural changes in the workforce have made such benefits a rare privilege for a minority of female workers who have retained their full-time positions over marriage and pregnancy.

What is more striking is that men are no longer immune to this trend. They began to work in jobs as precarious as those of women. The proportion of men working part-time increased from only 8.7% in 1990 to 21.6% in 2016 (MHLW 2016). The increase of male part-time workers is particularly pronounced among the younger cohort of 15 to 24 years of age: 31.7% in 2015 reaching almost as high as that of female part-time workers, which is 37.5%. That is, the employment situation for men is as precarious

⁴ The amendment of Child Care Leave Law in 2009 enabled part-time workers to take maternity and child care leave, but in practice, they has to be “qualified” by having “undermined employment period,” which often contradict the personnel parctice of hiring part-time workers.

as that of women. While we are observing gender equality at the bottom among the younger cohort, there is still a large gender gap in the proportion of part-time workers within the older cohort in the 40s and 50s, suggesting that once hired in the main-stream career track, the core male workers (and perhaps their wives) have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo that there is very little incentive for change.

“Standard Family” in Demise

Fertility decline is now listed as one of the most important policy agendas. If the Japanese fail to procreate the social security and pension systems are doomed to fail. This is because successive generations were assumed to support the preceding ones in return for the earlier benefits they received themselves. Fertility decline is also a problem since it will cause a labor shortage in the long run due to the shrinking size of the productive population. Alarmed by such forecasts, the Japanese government started a number of initiatives for a more “family friendly” and “gender equal” society.

In a quarter of a century since Japanese politicians began to address these issues, the gendered structure of society has not yet observed

any substantial change. Why are we seeing politicians repeat the same rhetoric today: advancement of women in the workforce and politics, increasing the availability of daycare, reformation of the male-dominated breadwinner system, persuading men to cut down their long hours of work and share more of the childcare responsibilities, etc.

As this article has shown, policies introduced have often been in contradiction regarding the roles expected of women. On the one hand, women are expected to procreate and are encouraged to limit their labor supply at least when their children are young. On the other hand, women are expected to increase their labor supply without any substantial changes in the work environment and gender relations in the family. The remnants of the much prized Japanese-style Welfare System has hindered changes and kept the breadwinner system quite intact.

The increase in the proportion of part-time workers not only among women but also among men suggests that job security of male workers, which used to be taken for granted, is now being diminished. Young Japanese men have begun to work part-time in proportion as high as that of young women, signifying that there are fewer men who qualify to become a breadwinner with stable jobs. Gender equality in Japan is being achieved

not by the advancement of women's position but by men being dichotomized into those who can earn a living and those who cannot.

As a result, what we are seeing is the demise of the Japanese family. More precisely, the standard family (*hyojun kazoku*), the prototype family that the Japanese policy makers have assumed is no longer representative of the Japanese family both in its structure and in its practices. Well over one-third of the households in Japan are single-person households, surpassing the number of the households that consist of parents and unmarried children. Moreover, more than 75% of the Japanese households do not have children under 18 years of age (MHLW 2013). People nod to the news that childcare centers and child-related facilities are now regarded as "nuisances" to local communities because of the "noise" that small children make (Asahi Shimbun 6/3/2014).

The contradictions among policies that retained gender inequality are now undermining the post-war structure of Japanese corporate society. Japanese family policies have long ignored the gender gap. Japan now has to face the unexpected outcomes. The Japanese family is now in its demise as the basic institution for procreating its population.

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