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Sharing of Housework and Childcare in Contemporary Japan

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1. Background and Overview

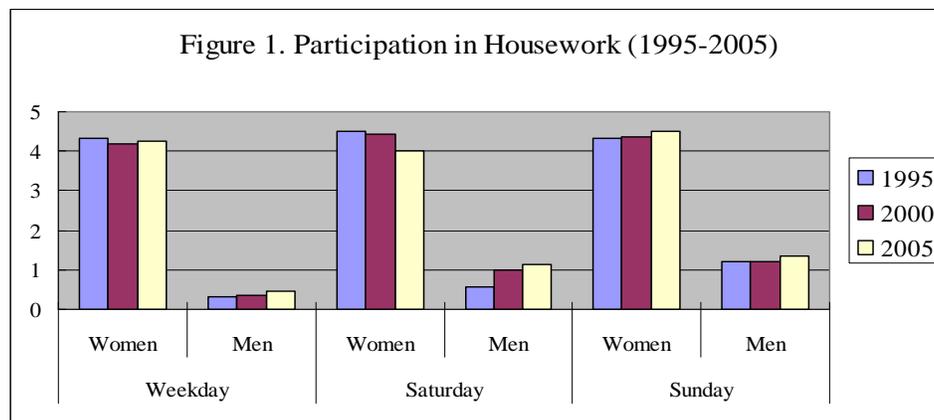
A typical image of Japanese families is that of a traditional one with strict gendered division of housework and childcare between husbands and wives. Although this is still the case in many contemporary Japanese families, there are several reasons why they are undergoing a transition. First, there has been a sharp decline in the birthrate in Japan since the early 1990s. This has been partly attributed to women's reluctance to have babies due to their husbands' lack of participation in child rearing and housework (Ishii-Kuntz, 1994, 2003). The declining birthrate has also been a serious concern among Japanese government officials (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2000), generating a 1999 campaign appealing for greater paternal involvement. The Ministry even produced a series of TV commercials and posters with the slogan, "A man who doesn't raise his children can't be called a father." Although Japanese men's participation in childcare is still lower than that of women, these governmental efforts triggered by the declining birthrate made the Japanese public aware of the importance in women and men sharing household labor and child rearing. Second, while the labour force participation of Japanese men remained relatively unchanged, Japanese women's labour force participation significantly increased, particularly among younger mothers. For example, the labour force participation rate among women of childbearing years (25 to 39 years of age) increased from 60.2% in 1995 to 66.9% in 2005 (Statistics Bureau, 2006). As a consequence, the number of double-earner families has increased from 46% in 1995 to 53% in 2005 (Statistics Bureau, 2006), suggesting that the traditional division of household labour where a man is the sole financial provider and a woman is the main care provider for the family is no longer a dominant pattern in many families. Third, with the ongoing economic recession, an increasing number of Japanese men are becoming discontented with their jobs and the workplace (Ishii-Kuntz, 1996). According to a nationwide survey, 24 percent of Japanese men in 1978 considered paid work the most important aspect of their lives. However, this figure declined to 8 percent in 2005. Further, whereas 52% of Japanese men in 1987 agreed that it is desirable for men to concentrate on paid work, the comparable figure declined to 30% in 2001.

Despite these sociodemographic and the subsequent attitudinal changes, there still exist gendered differences with respect to participation in housework and care work in contemporary Japanese families. In this report, I will first present differences and inequalities between Japanese women and men concerning household labour and care work at home. Second, based on my research on Japanese fatherhood, I will describe the ways in which fathers are involved in childcare and housework. Additionally, I will review several research findings concerning the effects of paternal involvement on family members. Third, I will critically evaluate current "family-friendly" policies in Japan. Finally, I will propose relevant

and concrete recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners, and educators in terms of how they can help eliminate gendered nature of sharing housework and care work in the near future.

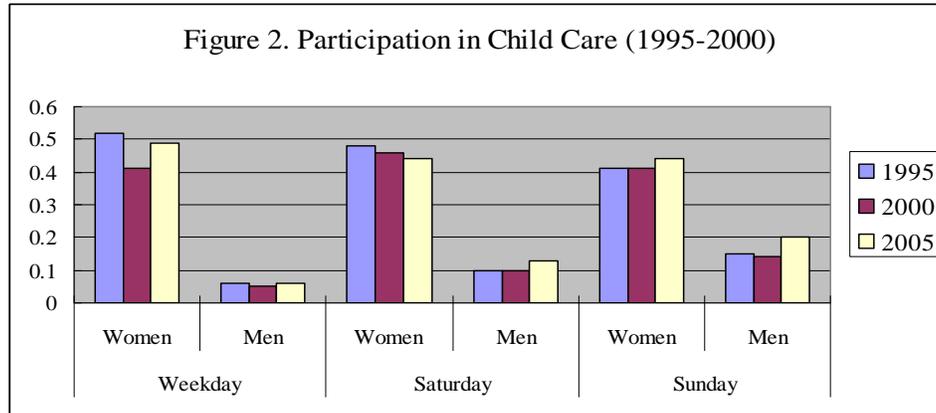
2. Gendered Differences and Inequalities in Housework and Care Work

According to the nationwide survey conducted by NHK (2005, Nippon Broadcasting Association), there remains a sharp division between women and men in terms of their participation in housework and childcare. As shown in Figure 1, although there is a slight increase in men’s participation in housework between 1995 and 2005, women spend considerably more time (daily average of 4.26 hours) in doing housework compared to men (1.38 hours) in 2005.



Source: NHK (2005) Japanese Time Use in 2005.

A similar gendered difference also exists with respect to child caring activities as shown in Figure 2. On average, Japanese mothers spend approximately 46 minutes whereas fathers spend only 13 minutes per day in taking a *physical* care of their children in 2005. These patterns show that Japanese women still assume major responsibilities in housework and childcare whereas men play a peripheral role when it comes to family work.



Source: NHK (2005) Japanese Time Use in 2005.

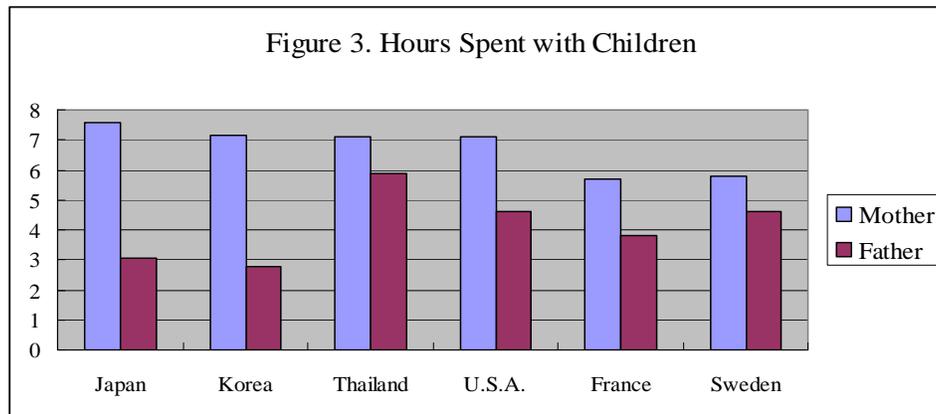
As the fastest aging society in the world, Japanese government has taken numerous steps to ensure that the frail elderly are cared for in a comfortable environment (Ishii-Kuntz, 1999). However, despite the wide options available for elder care including various institutional care facilities, nearly 75% of the Japanese elderly are cared for by family members. According to the Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2004), most of the family care are provided by women (74.9%) whereas the proportion of men caring for frail elderly at home remains low (25.1%).

In summary, governmental efforts to encourage the sharing of housework and care work have triggered the changes in women and men's perception toward domestic responsibilities. Current data, however, indicate that Japanese women still play a major role in household labor and care work.

3. Fathers' Involvement in Childcare and Housework

Japanese fathers' limited participation in childcare and housework has been reported in previous studies and in media reports (Ishii-Kuntz, 1994, 2003). Cross-cultural studies also reveal that Japanese fathers spend much less time with their children than do fathers in such Western countries as the United States, France, and Sweden (National Women's Education Center, NWECC, 2005). According to this international survey, Japanese men spend a daily average of 3.08 hours with their children whereas mothers spend 7.57 hours. As shown in Figure 3, Japanese mothers spend much longer hours with their children than do fathers, and this gender gap is the largest in Japan compared to other countries included in this study. Interestingly, the average hours Japanese fathers spend with their children per day decreased from 3.32 hours in 1994 when the comparable international survey data were collected. Further, only 7.6% of Japanese couples reported sharing responsibilities with respect to feeding their children, which, was lower than Korea (14.8%), Thailand (19.6%), U.S.A.

(28.3%), France (20.4%), and Sweden (29.6%). It is also important to note that these figures include such non-interactive hours as watching TV with children.



Source: National Women's Education Center, International Comparative Survey on Family Life Education (2004-2005)

Several studies also report that the types of childcare activities that Japanese women and men engage in differ considerably (Ishii-Kuntz, 2003). For example, it was found that Japanese men who spend time with their children are most likely to engage in “fun” activities such as taking a walk or eating (not preparing) meals with their children, compared with their wives who are more likely to do most of the mundane physical care of their children.

Within the last decade, Japanese fathers' limited involvement in child rearing has been a topic of several investigations (see, Ishii-Kuntz, Makino, Kato & Tsuchiya, 2004; Matsuda, 2006). For example, Ishii-Kuntz et al. (2004) examined factors that were associated with Japanese gendered division of childcare, and found that Japanese women and men are *less* likely to share childcare when;

- (1) they live in extended households (with their parents or parents-in-law);
- (2) mothers are not employed;
- (3) men work longer hours including night shifts, and commute longer distance from home to workplace;
- (4) women and men have traditional gender ideology; and
- (5) men's workplace lacks family-friendly policies and atmosphere.

In addition, some studies examined the consequences of paternal involvement on children and marital relationship. We know that men's active involvement in childcare is positively associated with children's attachment to fathers (Hanta, 1987), egalitarian gender ideology (Kato, 1992), independence (Onodera, 1987), sociability (Kato, 2002), and social network (Ishii-Kuntz, 1998). It was also found that men's participation in housework and

childcare increases the level of couples' communication and marital satisfaction (Suemori, 1999).

In summary, the level of Japanese fathers' participation in housework and childcare has changed little over the last 15 years, and it remains lower compared to other countries. However, when Japanese fathers are involved in child caring activities, we know that it has a positive consequence on children and couples' psychological well-being.

4. "Family-Friendly" Laws and Policies

With the concern over the sharp decline in the birthrate, the Japanese government has been introducing various "family-friendly" policies and laws since the early 1990s. As shown in Table 1, these policies are classified into four main categories of "work-related," "childcare programs," "community childcare support," "health insurance," and "financial support."

Table 1: Family-Friendly Policies in Japan

Work-related	Maternity Leave, Child Care Leave, Shortened Work-Hours, Mother's Hello Work, Mother's Salon
Childcare programs	Day Care Centers, After-School Children's Clubs
Community childcare support	Short-Stay, Twilight Program, Family Support Center, Kindergarten, After-School Children's Class, Children's Center
Health insurance	Mother-Child Health Book, Health Check-Ups for Expectant Mothers and Infants,
Financial support	Childbirth Allowance, Childbirth and Childcare One-Time Allowance, Child Support

In the following section, I will review some policies and laws that are particularly relevant for women and men assuming equal responsibilities at home.

- (1) **Law Concerning the Welfare of Workers Who Take Care of Children or Other Family Members, Including Childcare and Family Care Leave** (Childcare and Family Care Leave): Enacted in 1992, this law, for the first time, allowed Japanese fathers to take child and family care leave from work. According to this law, employees are able to take child care leave until the child is 12 months old (18 months in exceptional cases such as not being able to find a childcare center, or if the designated child-caring parent is

deceased, injured, or became ill), and family care leave for 93 days while receiving the guaranteed 30% of the monthly salary from the Employment Insurance. Gendered gap appears with the most current figures of 72.3% of mothers and only 0.5% of fathers taking this leave. Further, class-based inequalities were noted since this law initially prohibited men who work for smaller-sized firms from taking childcare leave.

- (2) **Limitation of Work Hours (including Flex Time) and Night Work:** According to this law, employees who have preschool children are allowed to limit their overtime work up to 24 hours a month, and can avoid working in midnight shifts from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. Employees who have children under 12 months but not taking childcare leave can be granted flexible work-hour arrangement (Flex Time), and are allowed to shorten their work hours. Similar to Childcare Leave, this arrangement is mostly taken by female employees.
- (3) **Law Concerning Childcare Support for the Next Generations:** In response to the declining birthrate, the government enacted this law in 2005. Under this law, prefectural (state) governments as well as employers are requested to create “action plans” in support for parents of child rearing years. Local governments are also asked to establish Childcare Support Centers along with the committee to create concrete plans for such a support.
- (4) **Work-Life-Balance Charter:** Enacted in December 2007, this policy demands employers, and federal and local governments to create concrete “action plans” which enable their employees to balance between work and life (including family life). To promote this charter, the government started “*Kaeru*” (“frog” or “change” in Japanese) Campaign in 2008 with the main theme of changing lifestyles of working women and men (see the campaign poster below that states, “Let’s change the way you work. *Kaeru*! Change! Japan.”).



It is important to note that these policies and campaigns do not necessarily guarantee equal responsibilities between women and men at home. In fact, there are only two laws in Japan that guarantee gender equality; The Law on Securing of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment enacted in 1972, and The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society enacted in 1999. Although these two laws aim to guarantee gender-equality, the former law has not been very effective due partly to the lack of penalty system associated with it, and the latter law has been criticized for lacking specificities in its application.

5. Recommendations for Policy-Makers, Practitioners and Educators

In order to bring about equal responsibilities between women and men in childcare and household labour, it is necessary to change both structures and attitudes (Ishii-Kuntz et al., 2004). According to Matsuda (2006), we need to change men's working patterns and habits to achieve gender equality at home. Others emphasize the importance of changing women's work style (Yashiro, 2008) as well as public perceptions toward gendered division of labour (e.g., Mifune, 2008). Based on the past experiences and lessons learned from practices, and research conducted in Japan, I outline below concrete recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners and educators in order to achieve the equal responsibilities between women and men with respect to childcare and housework;

Promoting gender equality in employment: It is essential to create gender-sensitive work environment for both women and men. Specifically, the following efforts should be included in the process of policy-making:

- (1) Strengthening and researching the effectiveness of the existing gender equality laws.
- (2) Constructing network for employed mothers through career guidance and workshops.
- (3) Promoting "career education" for women including technology-oriented seminars.
- (4) Shortening work hours for men by promoting Telework and other alternative working styles.
- (5) Improving work conditions and salary for part-time, dispatched, and home-based (SOHO) workers, and offering them consultation for work-related problems.
- (6) Providing counseling for working women and men concerning work- and family-related problems.

Friendly policies for child rearing and family care work

- (1) Promoting and encouraging child and family care leave by re-educating employers and employees.
- (2) Increasing facilities that provide diverse types of childcare including infant care, extended care, and after-school programs, and strengthening Family Support Center systems by including child rearing workshops and seminars for fathers.

Education promoting equal sharing of domestic responsibilities between women and men

- (1) Campaigning to change gendered attitudes of women and men through public lectures, seminars, forums, panel discussions, and newsletters.

- (2) Promoting gender equality in governments, companies, and other groups by offering “gender-sensitivity” workshops, and publicizing and rewarding those who attend such seminars and actively practice gender equality in their organizations.
- (3) Creating opportunities for new parents to learn equal sharing of domestic responsibilities through seminars and Father-Infant Book. Teaching the importance of unpaid work through family life education courses.
- (4) Correcting gender-biased education systems through teacher training, creating gender-sensitive contents of counseling and guidance, and offering courses on gender equality to students in elementary and secondary schools.
- (5) Promoting gender equality at the community level by appointing female leaders in the community and neighborhood associations, offering courses for men on gender equality, and creating a section in the public libraries with books and magazines on gender equality.
- (6) Evaluating and researching how gender equality is practiced in day care centers, schools, communities and companies, setting up an Opinion Box on gender equality in public places, offering lectures on pension systems, introducing persons in the community who practice gender equality in various ways, and creating opportunities to build supportive networks to exchange ideas on gender-equality.

Media portrayal of women and men

- (1) Creating policies that provide guidelines on gender-equal portrayal of women and men on TV, newspapers, magazines, movies, and other media.
- (2) Setting up watchdog groups against the biased portrayal of women and men’s roles in the media.
- (3) Increasing employment and promotional opportunities for women in the media.

Key References

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