

Japan's Family Friendly Policies

Why Fathers Matter

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This article is a research report introducing the main findings of the study conducted as a part of the researcher's Master's Thesis on Japanese Family Friendly Policies (FFPs) and the effect they are having on advancing a gender balanced society in Japan, focusing on the influence fathers may have in this equation. The research included a three month field work on the experiences of parents who had utilised Family Friendly Policies since their implementation in the 1990s. The research found that the Japanese FFPs have failed to achieve their aims to increase the fertility rate and women's employability for the following three reasons. Firstly these aims are based on the foundations of gender neutrality in a society that is in reality highly divided along gender lines. Secondly the aims are narrow in scope and target group, and thirdly do not address the real causes of low fertility and employment problems. I argue that promoting the role of fathers as carers would disrupt established gender norms and the benefits of FFPs would cross gender lines and produce practical outcomes that the current FFPs are unable to produce.

Keywords: Family friendly, Policies, Fathers, Japan, Gender Imbalance

This research is an investigation into Japanese Family Friendly Policies (FFPs) that claim to facilitate better employment and career prospects for women, and through this process also improve fertility. My interest in this topic grew out of my frustration with the discourse on demographic problems in Japan, and the unbalanced nature of gender equality debates that primarily focus on women. There has been little progress in either of these arenas in the last 20 years, and the purpose of this research is to uncover why policies have failed to improve gender balance at work and overall fertility.

The particular aims and rationale of Japan's Family Friendly Policies focused on in this research make mention of two related issues affecting Japanese society: low fertility rate and women's poor employment rate and career prospects. The logic of the FFPs is that offering extended rights to families and employees through legislative changes will enable employees to maintain their careers through different life stages without having to

choose between continuing their career or having a family. This is expected to provide the labour force with more opportunities and support to simultaneously procreate and have a career (Takeishi 2005, Suzuki 2006, MHWL 2009a). The theoretical foundation of my research is based on this rationale. I argue that since Japanese society is built upon the post-war principle of a gendered division of labour and societal roles (Yashiro 2001, Atoh 2001, Kashiwase et. al. 2012, Osawa 2011), the FFPs alone will not function as tools for boosting either the demographic development or gender neutral employment.

I wanted to focus on fathers in a Japanese family unit, and the role they play in the fertility and employment equation for both genders, and to explore the potential effects of a more male oriented approach to studying the functionality of FFPs in Japan. The hypothesis of this research is that instead of solely focusing efforts to increase women's employability, men's role as carers should be promoted at an equal measure to induce faster attitude change on societal level.

Men's socio-economic role has remained largely unchanged since the post-war economic boom despite the demographic and economic troubles of the last 20 years, and become the norm which needs to be assumed by both males and females in the labor market. (Takeishi 2005). Women who want to work are expected to fit this 'norm' when entering and advancing in the labour market, while at the same time managing the added pressure of caring duties, resulting in the 'double burden' for Japanese working mothers (Coulmas 2007). I argue that by promoting the role of the father as a carer, distorting the established norm, the benefits of FFPs would cross gender lines and produce practical outcomes that the current implementation of FFPs are unable to produce.

I utilised primary data from the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour (MHWL) on Family Friendly Policies, such as statistics on labour market participation and fertility rates and longitudinal studies on employment (MHWL 2011a, 2011b, 2009b), as well as the 14th National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR 2011a, 2011b) longitudinal study on attitudes toward family, work and reproduction. In addition to this I completed a three month field work in Tokyo between August and November 2011, while working with a local Non-Profit Organisation 'Fathering Japan' to gauge the attitudes and experiences of men and women who have taken advantage of the FFPs. I completed a survey with 30 participants (10 men, 20 women), who had utilised childcare leave. I focused on childcare leave due to its centrality within the legislation and because its uptake is regularly used to exemplify the success/failure of the FFPs. Childcare leave is also normally the first piece of family friendly legislation that both men and women can utilise. The open ended nature of the survey questions enabled me to gauge individual experiences much greater depth than is possible in national surveys, while triangulation of the collected data indicated that the experiences were in line with phenomena observed in larger scale studies.

My research found that men's utilisation of FFPs primarily had a positive effect on role sharing

within families and their attitudes toward childcare, with all men remaining active in the home after the childcare leave period. This had a positive effect on the spousal relationship, and work-life balance and satisfaction for both partners. Research and statistical evidence on a national scale supported these findings (Sato *et al* 2009, MHWL 2011a, Takeishi 2005). The research found that 20 years of FFPs has influenced the structure and attitudes of Japanese society relatively little and eligibility and access to the FFPs and supporting services remain dependent on gender and type of employment. There are few legal provisions for balancing work and private life for unmarried people, likely having an effect on marriage rates and subsequent childbearing. With only a minority of fathers being able to utilise the FFPs, their potential is likely to remain limited.

The Uncomfortable Fit of Japan's Family Friendly Policies?

Family friendly policies can be regarded as the collective name for a number of legislative measures and initiatives implemented by the Japanese government (and to some extent third sector and private operators), to make it easier for parents to combine their duties at work and at home to achieve work-life balance. The trend for these policies began in the early 1990s when Japan was simultaneously struck with the lowest recorded fertility rate and the bursting of the bubble economy. It has been argued that it became important to simultaneously promote women's entry into the labour market for the country to find its way out of the recession, and correct the demographic slump (Takeishi 2005, Suzuki 2006, Schoppa 2006).

Japan at the time had few legal measures to support this, and the idea of a working mother as a societal concept was still rather new (Atoh 2001). Japan has heavily relied on the gendered division of labour in the post-war period and this efficiency contributed to the post-ward economic growth. Gender segregation in Japan has taken place along economic lines, with both sexes having their established tasks within the economic

and welfare system; men form the core of the labour force and women provide social care that takes place at the family and societal levels. Social welfare policies such as childcare services, pension schemes and even the organisation of health care policies have all relied on this separation of roles along gender lines (Yashiro 2001, Atoh 2001, Kashiwase et. al 2012, Osawa 2011).

The FFPs, however, have not been strong enough to break economic codependency between men and women, and have had very little influence in the rates of women's continuous employment in Japan, despite the government's success in increasing women's utilisation of childcare leave (Schoppa 2006, Suzuki 2006). This can be indicated by the figures on women's employment after giving birth. Little has changed in the last three decades:

more radically with the desire to be married to a full-time housewife falling from nearly 40% to 10% in 18 years. Similarly, a third of men in 2010 wanted their spouse to keep working while having children, up from 10% in 1987 (NIPSSR 2011b). While these figures are an indication of a more rapid value shift among men, the reasons for this need to be considered in the societal context of women being less economically independent and men having fewer opportunities to participate in childcare. The uptake of childcare leave among men has since its implementation remained negligible, below 3% (MHWL 2013).

Opportunities to utilise FFPs seem a luxury based on employment type, i.e. with persons in regular employment having an easier access to the policies rather than those working in non-regular employment (e.g. fixed term contracts).

Women's Continuous Employment and Childcare Leave Uptake			
Birth year of first child	Employed before the birth of first child	Continued employment after birth	Uptake of Childcare Leave (average*)
1985-1989	61.4%	24.0	n/a
1990-1994	62.1	24.4	n/a
1995-1999	63.5	24.2	52.7%
2000-2004	67.3	26.7	69.0%
2005-2009	70.7	26.8	88.6%

Source: NIPRSS 2011a, MHWL 2011b

*Averages calculated from data from the years where data are available: 1996, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010

A significant proportion of unmarried women still hold on to the idea of established role separation. While the desire to become a full-time housewife has decreased since the 1980s, still in 2010, 20% of unmarried women stated that given the chance they would want to become full-time homemakers, down from 33% in 1987. Continuing to work while having children was given as the desired lifecourse by 20% of women in 1987 and had increased to only 30% nearly two decades later. Interestingly, the same study indicates that men's attitudes toward the employment status of their spouse have changed

However, everyone is eligible to take childcare leave as long as they fulfill the requirements for the nature of employment they are engaged in (length and frequency of work). Alongside regular employees, non-regular employees who have been employed by the same employer for one year or more and are likely to be employed after the end of the leave period are also eligible for the leave. However, the proportion of employees working on fixed term contracts (i.e. non-regular employment) who took childcare leave ranged from 0.2% to 4.5% depending on the regularity of contract renewals by their employer,

indicating that opportunities to take childcare leave among non-regular workers remain limited (JILPT 2007).

While regular employment still remains widespread today, the share of men in regular employment between the ages of 25 and 34 has fallen from 90% in 1992 to 60% in 2010 (NIPSSR 2011b). As there is a correlation between marriage and fertility in Japan, marriage rates become an important indicator of national fertility as well. Compared to the national average of 1.39 in 2010, the fertility rate among married couples was considerably higher at nearly 2 (NIPSSR 2011a), while births outside marriage remain rare in Japan (OECD 2012). The likelihood of marriage again is connected to employment type, with only 12% of men in non-regular employment getting married between 2002 and 2007, compared to double the figure for men in regular employment (MHWL 2009, 2011). This suggests that employment type, marriage and fertility are all interlinked.

Family Friendly Policies therefore seem increasingly narrow and elitist in their scope by ironically offering balancing measures primarily to people who are already in secure employment and have chosen to have a family, rather than focusing on the effects working styles and employment status have on fertility (Takeishi 2005, Schoppa 2006).

Sato *et al* (2009) find that more than 40% of Japanese employees, both married and unmarried, find work conflicting with their private lives and interests, with 70% of unmarried men and 68% of unmarried women stating they would be unable to, or unsure about whether they would be able to care for a child or a dependent while holding their current job. The highest level of work-life balance was reported among people who also exhibited high levels of satisfaction and commitment to their organisations (Sato *et al* 2009).

In the same study, women scored the highest level of work-life conflict, while child rearing was ranked as the second and third biggest cause of work-life conflict among both men and women

respectively, men ranking it higher than women, indicating that making work-life adjustments on the grounds of childcare seems to be more difficult for men. The most common avenue to resolving work-life conflict was to make work-related adjustments (32% of respondents). Overall 12% of respondents said they had opted to leave the organisation on the grounds of conflicts between work and personal lives (Sato *et al* 2009).

However, even the 'elite' are struggling to strike a balance. Fertility rates have been decreasing among married couples since the 1990s, and as seen above, the proportion of women in continuous employment through their reproductive years has increased only marginally. It was therefore important to take a closer look at the main target group itself and unravel why even the 'elite' are finding it difficult strike a balance. Evidence began to suggest a positive correlation between the number of children and the hours men participated in household and childcare duties: 61.2% of families where the father spent eight hours or more on childcare and household chores on his days off had a second or more children, compared to 14.3% of families that practised no role sharing (MHWL 2011a). The focus of my research therefore shifted to the father within this context.

Why Fathers Matter

Fathering Japan is an organisation that provides seminars and events to private citizens, groups and corporations, functions as the contact point for an active community of fathers, and produces material on participatory fatherhood. Due to linguistic and time restrictions, the field research composed primarily of a survey that used a structure of open ended questions that fathers were asked to fill in on their own time after an initial discussion at the recruitment phase. Female informants were recruited through *Yanaka Baby-Mom*, a neighbourhood parents' association that operates in the Yanaka area of the Taito-ward.

I narrowed the scope to of the survey to those who had taken childcare leave, which enabled me to focus on the central piece of legislation among

the Family Friendly Policies. Uptake of childcare leave among men is particularly low, 2.63% in 2011 (MHWL 2013). The survey comprised of five themes:

1. Desire to form a family
2. Preparations for child's arrival
3. Preparations for Childcare Leave
4. Experiences during the leave
5. Societal impact of the leave

I anticipated that men and women might face different types of problems both collectively and separately. Questions on family finances, taking childcare leave and returning to work all carried their assumed gender stereotypings, e.g. that financial stability would be primarily a male concern and returning to work would be more difficult for women. This largely held true with my informants but the details of the difficulties they faced and the experiences many had had brought new insights into the broader research. One surprising aspect was the depth of concern fathers expressed of their capabilities as fathers, bond with their child and ability to physically care for the child. I anticipated that they would have referred to the financial burden of having a child more than they did, as 'breadwinner' is the typical male role in Japanese families; even though this was a concern for many, a *shiyō ga nai* (it can't be helped) -attitude prevailed among responses when the subject came to money.

When asked about their decision to take childcare leave and their preparations for it, most men responded that their personal determination was driving their decisions and actions. However, legislation was also mentioned. It seems that more men than women in my survey relied on the protection of the law, partly perhaps due to the prevailing norm that taking childcare leave is more natural for women. Because of this men felt the need to justify their decision more carefully; and some faced resistance.

I wasn't particularly influenced by anything [in my decision to take childcare leave], but I thought that if such a system existed, I would use it.

Civil Servant, Male (26)

Last year [2010] the legislation was revised and the system in my company was also affected. As a result, they changed the wording for men's childcare leave from 'each case will be judged individually' to 'anyone falling into the conditions for childcare leave will be granted leave'

Office Worker, Male (40)

I was warned about becoming 'career-less' losing out on my career; some people also acted coldly towards me.

Sales Person, Male (31)

Most of the surveyed women did not mention leave taking as problematic, but their responses did echo difficulties in managing their lives after childbirth. Women worried about whether they would be able to secure a place in daycare for their child, if returning to the same post would be possible, and about how they would be able to catch up with the work. While the childcare leave legislation states that leave takers must be guaranteed the same position as before they left, company restructuring and changes in job descriptions were mentioned as ways in which women were 'mommy-tracked' without violating the law. Some women also worried about the working environment, which can negatively affect their job satisfaction and the perception of childcare as a burden (Sato et. al. 2009, Takeshi 2005). As majority of women still give up their jobs after having children (NIPRSS 2011a, MHWL 2011b), changes in job satisfaction and position upon return need to be considered as potential causes.

At the moment I am planning on going back to work, but I am worried about it as well. Since I have been away they have made some organisational changes in my company, so I would not be able to return to the same post doing the same duties as before. I think the working environment would not be as it was before and I don't really have interest returning there as a result.

Office Worker, Female (33)

I used to work as in advertisement and

in this position the work extends late at night and many people are affected by this. Since the company could not change the structure of the work, my job description was changed instead. The content of my work has changed and I am currently trying to somehow combine work and my family.

Office Worker, Female (33)

Men found the childcare leave to have had a profound psychological effect on them in terms of respect and understanding towards mothers, and said the experiences from childcare had influenced their working styles too. Many mentioned the relationship with their partner had improved and they experienced fewer marital disputes than previously. All fathers had remained active in childcare and household chores after their initial leave period, and had assumed responsibility over various daily routines (e.g. dropping children at school). As men's participation in childcare has a positive effect on fertility (MHWL 2011a), childcare leave and other FFPs seem to offer Japanese men a legal and increasingly acceptable avenue for active fatherhood; even if in a limited scope nationally.

Due to the small number of men who have utilised FFPs in Japan, it is difficult to say whether this could have a positive effect on women's employment rate, and not much research has been conducted on the relationship. All of my male informants reported their wives having either returned to work, or were planning to do so after their leave. One male informant said he took childcare leave in order to enable his wife to return to work. More work on the subject is needed and this should prove a fruitful area of further research.

Conclusions

My research, although limited in scope, provided evidence that the higher utilisation of Family Friendly Policies by men has a positive effect on gender relations and attitudes as well as approaches toward work-life balance. Wider implications are not verifiable due to the small scale of the project, but the findings support the hypoth-

esis that the greater promotion of men's roles as carers could induce faster attitude change and help disrupt the entrenched post-war model of gender segregation. Current measures can be seen as overly oriented toward women while the post-childbirth employment rates among women has remained stagnant, indicating that the one-sided discussion has not yielded the desired results, despite a majority of female employees utilising FFPs (i.e. childcare leave).

However, men's integration into family life can only go so far unless the structures of Japanese welfare policies and labour market practises, built upon a gendered economic structure, are also profoundly re-evaluated. Inefficiency and inadequate supply of childcare services for instance create barriers for women returning to work, a problem the government has not responded to the degree required.

Family Friendly Policies are therefore unlikely to result in the integration of women into the labour market and higher fertility rates without a wider disruption of the gendered division of labour that has affected the design and organisation of social and welfare policies in Japan in the post-war era. As the policies themselves have been designed in a gendered vacuum and discussed in an unbalanced manner, largely excluding the potential of fathers as part of the solution, reaching gender balance in the society through these policies alone seems unlikely.

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Related links:

NPO Fathering Japan (English)
<http://www.fathering.jp/english/>

Yanaka Baby-Mom (Japanese only)
<http://yanakababymom.com/>

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