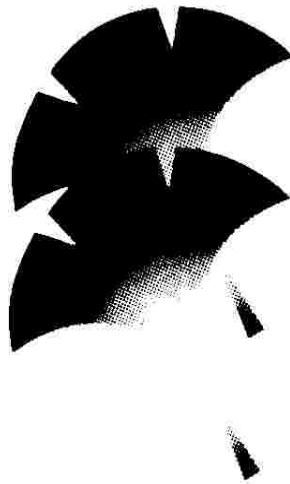


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**Coping with Low Fertility?
Japan's Government Measures for a
Gender Equal Society**

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Abstract:

Coping with low fertility? Japan's Government Measures for a Gender Equal Society

Over the last couple of years the Japanese government has implemented measures to deal with the situation of a low fertility society, caused by the continued decrease in the number of birth and changes in marriage behavior. One of the primary policy measures in response to the rapid changes occurring in Japan's socioeconomic situation is to aim for a gender-equal society. Hence, the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society was promulgated in 1999, a plan which also called upon local governments to come up with agendas.

One of the basic principles that is covered in this law is the "consideration of social systems or practices" that have an impact on how social activities are performed by a person of a specific gender. Another principle is the "compatibility of activities in family life and other activities" that should be promoted, so that women and men can carry out their roles smoothly as household members in home-related activities. Both principles reflect on the demographic problem of fewer children and the growing population of elderly people in Japan. This paper traces the different steps of policy measures for the falling birthrate that have been promoted by the Gender Equality Bureau and the different ways in which the awareness for gender equality has been targeted towards men and masculine corporate structures in particular.

Key words: low fertility; gender-equal society; falling birthrate; child-rearing; male work styles; "company man" discourse; men's liberation group; participation of men in family affairs.

1. The low fertility problem

The implementation of political reforms and measures to cope with the extremely low fertility rate of Japanese society has become a matter of urgent necessity to the Japanese government under Prime Minister Koizumi and has led to the establishment of a ministerial bureau in the Cabinet Office especially designed for the task. In Japan, which so far has had no explicit family policy with a public ministry in charge of it, the inauguration of Kuniko Inoguchi as “Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs” (this is the official English title, literally her title should be translated as “Minister of State for Declining Birthrate and Gender Equality” [*Naikakufu Tokumei Tantō Daijin – Shōshika Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku*]) in October 2005 is an indication of the rising awareness that the drop in the birthrate is closely related to radical changes in the country’s social fabric and the fact that equal opportunities for men and women to combine family care work and employment are still in demand.

When the government declared in June of this year that the nation’s total fertility rate sank to a new record low of 1.25 in 2005, with ever more people postponing marriage and ever fewer women giving birth soon after getting married, Prime Minister Koizumi expressed his serious concern to the media, concluding that measures to deal with the decreasing number of children will become a major policy item from then on.

The fertility rate of 2005 hit an all time low for the fifth year in a row, following 1.32 in 2002, and 1.29 both in 2003 and 2004, according to data released by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry. The downward trend has continued for decades in Japan since the rate fell below 2.00 in 1975. The latest figures showed that the pace of decline accelerated from the previous two years despite the government’s efforts to stem the further drop in the birthrate. The fertility rate for 2005 was released ahead of the

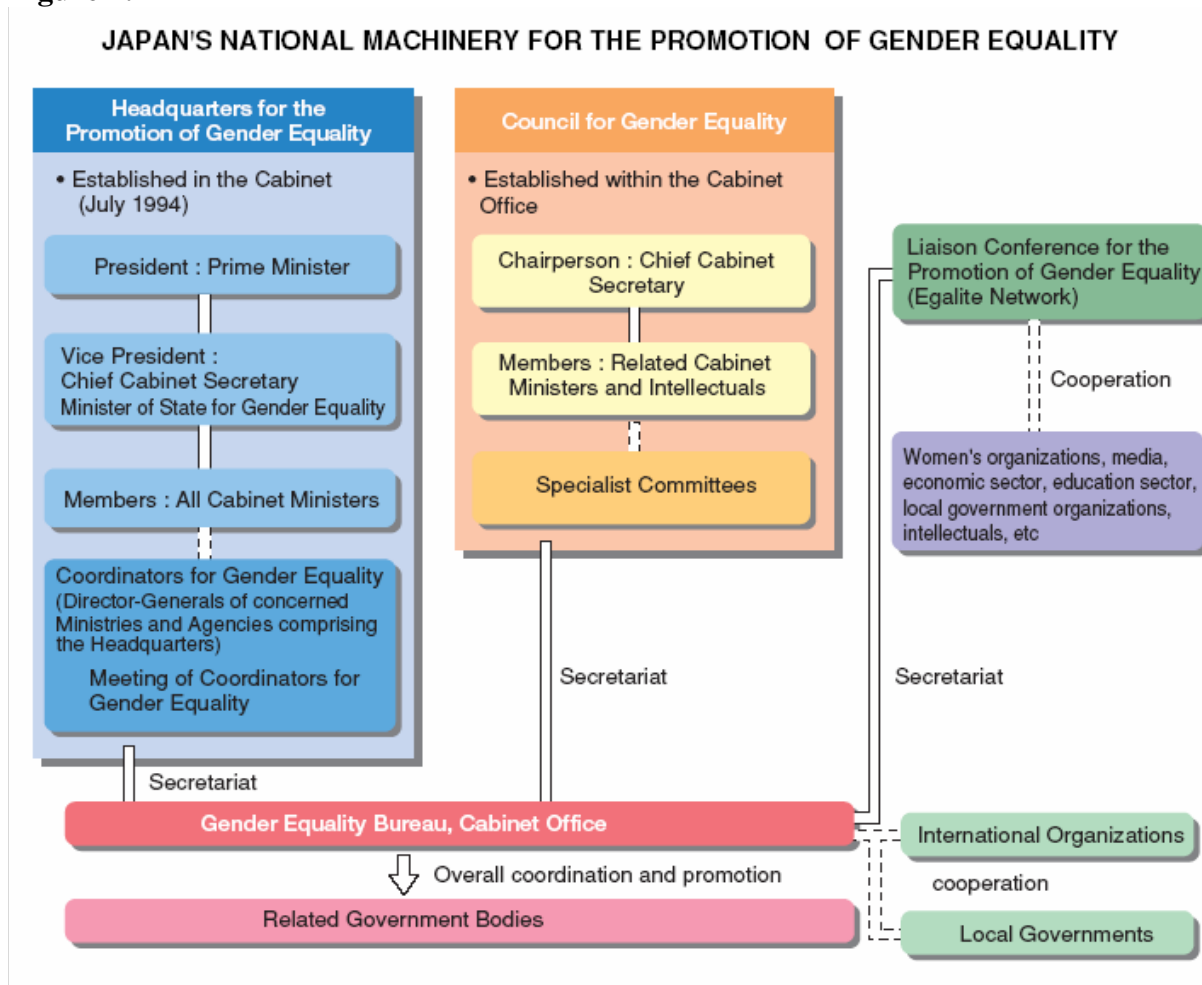
government's compilation, planned for June 2006, of a package of measures aimed at reversing the downward trend in the birthrate. The finding that the fall of the birthrate is accelerating has put additional pressure on the government to review its current welfare and labor policies, which are based on the assumption that the fertility rate will not drop below 1.31.¹

Since it has been proven that the decrease in fertility is due to changes in marriage-related behavior, such as the postponement of marriage or choosing to remain single throughout one's lifetime, policymakers are thoroughly studying the socio-economic factors influencing these behaviors. It has been suggested that the trend to remain single was mainly caused by a change in female attitudes. Segregated gender roles and the gendered division of labor that in the past have made it almost impossible for family women to keep regular employment status are now seen as the main factors that prevent young women from getting married and bearing children. In order to reverse this trend the realization of a gender equal society became the main objective already a decade ago, initially implemented by the Japanese government under then Prime Minister Hashimoto in December 1996, when the Japanese government initiated the "Plan for Gender Equality 2000," which led to the passing of the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society (*Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Kihon-hō*) in 1999. One of the basic principles that is covered in this law is the "consideration of social systems or practices" that have an impact on how social activities are performed by a person of a specific gender. Another principle is the "compatibility of activities in family life and other activities" that should be promoted, so that women and men can carry out their roles smoothly as household members in home-related activities. Both principles reflect on the demographic problem of fewer children and the growing population of elderly people in Japan.

¹ The nation's population decreased by a net 21,408—registered birth minus deaths—last year. The tally of births in 2005 dropped by 48,117 from the preceding year to a record-low 1,062,604 due to the lower fertility rate plus falls in the population of women aged 25 to 34, leading to the first drop in decades of babies born to a group aged 30–34, the ministry said. The average age at which women get married for the first time rose to 28.0 in 2005 from 27.8 the year before, and the average age at which they give birth for the first time rose to 29.1 from 28.9. The corresponding figures were 26.3 and 27.5 a decade ago.

The policy network that was established for the Promotion of Gender Equality in Japan consists of several separate bodies: the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender Equality, the Council for Gender Equality, the Gender Equality Bureau, and related government bodies. The network cooperates with different kinds of government and non-government-related institutions such as women’s organizations, the media, the economic sector, the education sector, local government organizations and intellectuals.

Figure 1:



Source: Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office (2006: 18)

In this paper I will give an overview of the Japanese governmental action plans and programs to deal with low fertility that have been introduced up to the present. The process of developing appropriate measures is part of the national machinery that has been established for the promotion of gender equality and is currently the duty of a

government's Specialist Committee on the Declining Birthrate and Gender Equality. I will argue that the state policies and their methods of implementation are not a straightforward course of action but can be seen as a public arena where conflicting views on gender roles and family patterns are pitted against each other. Since it has become obvious that the traditional type of middle class family model with a female homemaker and male breadwinner is being undermined, this insight opens the way for at least two different courses of action. One is the attempt to improve the economic means for young families and support them with child benefits and tax deduction, and thereby aim at the reconstitution of the nuclear family pattern. The other is the attempt to cope with changing family patterns and life styles, acknowledging the fact that childrearing is a reproductive task that cannot be exclusively assigned to families or mothers but is also a concern of state, local governments and public and private organizations. The latter approach includes a more radical redefinition of traditional gender roles and the gendered character of organizations such as work places. As far as measures such as encouraging men to take childcare or elderly care leave are concerned, this is a matter that addresses not only men themselves but also calls for economic organizations that allow men to do so, and requires the involvement of the education sector and of intellectuals to help disseminate new social and cultural norms of masculinity. In the last couple of years I have been studying the different ways in which men have been addressed and what topics concerning men were on the agenda when the question of gender equal participation was raised. In the second part of my paper I will therefore introduce activities and discourses on the local and media level that are contributing to the formation of a gender equal society and analyze how these issues are affecting men in Japan.

2. The definition of a gender-equal society

According to the definition of Japanese lawmakers, in a gender-equal society, i.e., a society in which men and women respect the other's human rights and share their responsibilities, every citizen should be able to fully exercise their individuality and abilities regardless of gender. The term "gender equality," which has been translated in

Japanese as “joint participation of men and women,” (*danjo kyōdō sankaku*) reflects two issues. Although the Japanese Government in an obviously conservative manner wanted to avoid the more radical definition of “gender equality” – which would have been translated as *danjo byōdō* – by promoting the more ambiguous Japanese term “joint participation,” this concept does in fact reflect the idea that politics should seek to abolish gender as a paradigm dividing Japanese society in order to build a society with joint participation. Consequently, gender equality can only be realized if men as well as women are involved in the objectives of gender politics (Ōsawa 2000: 6).

Mari Ōsawa in her article on “Government Approaches to Gender Equality” has pointed out that “gender” in the Japanese notion of the term has taken on the meaning of discrimination, division or disadvantage based on differences between men and women. It was the impact of the French feminist and sociologist Christine Delphy, whose understanding of gender as a category of difference which divides human society and therefore should be abolished, became very influential in Japan (Delphy 1984). Her usage of the term gender – in the sense of “stratified and asymmetric power relations” (Ōsawa 2000: 7, Ueno 1990, 1995) – has influenced gender politics in Japanese society and led to the formation of additional concepts such as gender-free society, which according to Ōsawa is a “society where the fact of being a man or woman has no effect on the options available to people as they make their way through life” (2000: 6). Last year the term “gender-free” became a hotly debated issue in the public media when the Tokyo Metropolitan government pressured the Kokubunji Municipal Government into canceling a lecture course on human rights that was planned to be held by sociologist Chizuko Ueno. The Metropolitan officials refused to sponsor the lecture course because the western Tokyo suburb was not able to ensure that the term “gender-free” would not be used by key feminist scholar Ueno. The cancellation of the course led to a protest campaign on the part of organizations and groups that saw the argument of the metropolitan government as a backlash against the state government’s gender policies aimed at establishing a gender-equal society. Ueno, who unwillingly found herself pitted against the metropolitan officials, publicly declared that she herself does not use the term gender-free, “because it has not been adopted by most gender studies scholars in the international academic community,” (Nakamura and Arita 2006: 1) but

nevertheless found it unacceptable that official agencies tried to ban the use of these words in public speech.

Some quarters in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party see the term gender-free as a denial of the differences between males and females, and as being detrimental to traditional family values. However problematic the term gender-free may actually be, it is my conviction that this dispute over language is simply an attempt to impede the project of realizing gender equality, which was initially launched with a strong push to move forward rapidly. In the international academic discourse the definition of gender does not necessarily refer to a reality that should be overcome or suppressed – as the term gender-free indicates – but is rather used as an epistemological concept which helps to understand how cultural and social differences between the sexes came into being and how they are structurally reproduced. In order to establish public understanding and sensitivity for how these differences affect individual lives, the German government, for example, has established policies of “gender mainstreaming”. “Gender mainstreaming” is a kind of political agenda that “in every social endeavor regularly and from the outset takes into consideration the different living situation and different interests of women and men since a gender-free reality does not exist” (quote from the homepage of the German Ministry of Family and Welfare).²

Although differences in the definition of gender are obvious, gender mainstreaming politics also forms a central part of the Japanese agenda of realizing a gender-equal society, such as for example aiming at expanding women’s participation in the policy-making process. But the politics of gender equality in the last few years definitely has come to mean more than demanding only better opportunities for women to participate more fully in society or the support of female professional employment by the enactment of quotas or positive discrimination. It cannot be denied that an all-embracing approach to a structural reform of society would have to change men’s lives and masculine work structures as well.

² “bei allen gesellschaftlichen Vorhaben die unterschiedlichen Lebenssituationen und Interessen von Frauen und Männern von vornherein und regelmäßig zu berücksichtigen, da es keine geschlechtsneutrale Wirklichkeit gibt,“ Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend on the topic of “Gender Mainstreaming;“ URL: <http://www.gender-mainstreaming.net/> (found 20/0704).

3. Plans for a new society

From the year 1994 on, the Japanese government began to consider the low birthrate as a “problem” that will turn into a threat to the social security system, economic productivity and the identity of the nation unless it is solved. In the same year the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry admitted publicly that the social and economic environment of Japan is not supportive of bearing and raising children and that a political agenda has to be formulated that describes “the outline of a society we have to aspire to” (*mezasubeki shakai no sugata*).

The first fundamental plan that was worked out was called the “Basic Direction of Measures for the Support of Child Rearing in the Future” (*Kongo no kosodate shien no tame no shisaku no kihonteki hōkō ni tsuite*). This first so called “Angel Plan” took childrearing as an issue that should not only be considered as a problem of a parenting couple or a household but also of the state and public institutions as well as of companies, work places and local communities (Naikakufu 2005: 22). The plan contained the description of the basic direction and the most important measures to be realized in the following ten-year period. In order to implement the Angel Plan an extension of child care facilities for young children under the age of three and the diversification of child care services were on the agenda.

In December 1999 the government agreed on a “Basic Plan for the Promotion of Measures for the Declining Birthrate” (*Shōshika taisaku suishin kihon hōshin*). This basic plan concluded that the main factor behind the declining birthrate was the problem of a maladjusted balance between women’s part-time work and childrearing and the growing sense of burden that childrearing is causing to parents and to the mother, in particular. What the policymakers were hoping for was that if these burdens were relieved, the trend to postponing marriage and starting a family could be reversed.

In the same year the basic plan’s measures were accorded top priority in a New Angel Plan that was the “concrete implementation of a plan that must enforce the promotion of measures for the declining birthrate” (*Jūtenteki ni suishin subeki shōshika taisaku no gutaiteki jisshi keikaku*). The New Angel Plan revised the “5-year undertaking of urgent childcare measures” into an objective that regarded improvement

of childcare not only in terms of childcare services, but also with regard to employment, mother-child insurances, mother-child consultation, education and other fields related to childcare. Glenda Roberts in her article on policy measures to stop Japan's declining birthrate gives a well documented account of the specific targets of the two Angel Plans and argues that the new one placed a higher priority on the insight that Japanese companies have to step up efforts to mobilize the balancing of work and family (Roberts 2002: 84).

In 2002 the MHLW compiled a policy that was named "Measures for the Declining Birthrate Plus One" (*Shōshika taisaku purasu wan*). The MHLW felt that the measures hitherto implemented were focused mainly on childcare and expansion of childcare facilities and suggested that measures should also incorporate the "reexamining of work styles including those of males" (*dansei o fukumeta hatarakikata no minaoshi*) and the "support of child education in local communities" (*chiiki ni okeru kosodate shien*) in order to reach the society as a whole and to guarantee that measures are implemented in an all-embracing manner (Naikakufu 2005: 23).

In March 2003 a ministerial conference agreed upon a "Plan to Urgently Implement Support for the Upbringing of the Next Generation" (*Jisedai ikusei shien ni kansuru tōmen no torikumi hōshin*) that had its basis in the MHLW's "plus one" measures. This plan focused on the weakening capacities of households and communities to raise children and came up with the proposal that the society as a whole has to support families in order to create an environment that allows children to grow up with healthy minds and bodies. A "Law to Promote Support Structures for the Upbringing of the Next Generation" that was passed in April 2005 implemented an action plan to encourage local communities and corporations to institutionalize support systems.

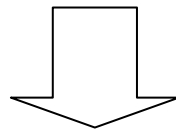
The Specialist Committee on the Declining Birthrate and Gender Equality, a project team consisting of specialists, parliamentary secretaries, and members of the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito, which since the beginning of 2006 has been studying countermeasures for the falling birthrate, will announce in June 2006 a new comprehensive reform policy. The "Outline of Countermeasures for a Society with a Falling Birthrate" (*Shōshika shakai taisaku taikō*) is being set up by combining plans made by the four groups. Since the reasons behind the low birthrate have once again

been systematically studied, and social analysts such as Masahiro Yamada and Yūji Genda have pointed out that anxiety about Japan's future and lack of hope about one's own career options among the younger generation have to be identified as the main factors behind the trend to remain single, the project team is considering a rather new type of countermeasures (Yamada 2004, 2005; Genda 2005; Saitō and Genda 2005). These take into account that the situation with respect to having and raising children is worsening and that the nation's economic circumstances are not likely to encourage Japan's younger generation to start families. As a result the initiatives have formulated three main areas of focus: the strengthening of young people's autonomy, the elimination of anxiety, and the use of communal and regional networks to help support parents raising children (Figure 2). In order to achieve a social atmosphere that will contribute to a more optimistic view about the future and help young people rely on large scale regional support networks for raising children, four priority issues have been put on the agenda that are to be promoted with 28 action plans (Figure 3). With the implementation of these large scale measures "the government will ensure the realization of a society where children will be born and where the happiness of bringing up children can be experienced" (Naikakufu 2005: Foreword).

Figure 2: “Outline of Countermeasures for a Society with a Falling Birthrate”
(Shōshika shakai taisaku taikō) **3 Areas of focus and 4 priority issues**

3 Areas of focus

I. Hope for autonomy and strength (<i>Jiritsu e no kibō to chikara</i>)
II. Elimination of anxiety and barriers (<i>Fuan to shōheki no jokyō</i>)
III. A new kind of mutual support and solidarity for child rearing – Familial ties and regional community ties (<i>Kosodate no aratana sasaeai to rentai—Kazoku no kizuna to chiiki no kizuna</i>)



4 Priority issues

I. The autonomy of young people and growth of strong children (<i>Wakamono no jiritsu to takumashii kodomo no sodachi</i>)
II. Supporting the balance between work and family and the reexamination of work styles (<i>Shigoto to katei no ryōritsu shien to hatarakikata no minaoshi</i>)
III. Understanding of the importance of life and the role of the family (<i>Seimei no taisetsusa, katei no yakuwari nado ni tsuite no rikai</i>)
IV. A new kind of mutual support and solidarity for child rearing (<i>Kosodate no aratana sasaeai to rentai</i>)

Source: Naikakufu (2005: 25)

Figure 3: “Outline of Countermeasures for a Society with a Falling Birthrate”
(Shōshika shakai taisaku taikō)
28 Action plans to implement 4 priority issues

The autonomy of young people and growth of strong children

- (1) Supporting young people’s employment
- (2) Expanding scholarships
- (3) Developing an idea of human nature that is rich in experience
- (4) Supporting children’s learning

Supporting the balance between work and family and the reexamination of work styles

- (5) Promoting further steps of implementation in companies etc.
- (6) Promoting the implementation of systems of childcare leave
- (7) Propagating father programs etc. in order to enhance the participation of men in childcare
- (8) Reducing working hours, promoting an environment that aims at the realization of work-life compatibility
- (9) Promoting a work environment that makes it possible to continue working safely even in case of pregnancy or after giving child birth
- (10) Promotion of return to work after taking a leave

Understanding for the importance of life and the role of the family

- (11) Aiming at the expansion of facilities where contact with babies and infants is possible
- (12) Promoting understanding for the importance of life and the role of the family etc.
- (13) Promoting understanding for building a society where giving birth and raising children safely is possible

A new kind of mutual support and solidarity for child rearing

- (14) Expanding education and care for preschool children
 - (15) Expanding activities for after-school care
 - (16) Aiming at the expansion of equipment and function of foothold for child rearing support in local areas
 - (17) Implementation of support for family child care
 - (18) Utilization of local residents, support of nongovernmental groups, and promotion of intergenerational exchange
 - (19) Promoting measures against child abuse
 - (20) Promoting support for families that are in particular need of support
 - (21) Promoting the simplification of Civil Service
 - (22) Expansion of medical service system for infants
 - (23) Supporting children’s health
 - (24) Expansion of support systems for pregnancy, child birth and obstetrical medical service
 - (25) Implementation of support for non-fertility treatment
 - (26) Providing a secure housing environment and high quality housing
 - (27) Promote barrier-free child rearing
 - (28) Considering increasing amount of child benefits and revision of current tax system
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Source: Naikakufu (2005: 25)

The main idea behind considering young people's economic situation is that young men's incomes have become increasingly unstable since 1995 and that structural changes in the labor market have led companies to reduce regular employment positions. An international survey conducted by the government has also revealed that the main reason why Japanese parents are more reluctant to have more children than parents in other countries is because children are very expensive to raise and educate. The Cabinet Office survey of parents in five countries found that only 42.6 percent of Japanese parents with children said they wanted to have a second or a third child. Japan ranked lowest among the five nations surveyed, with 81.1 percent of parents in Sweden saying they wanted more children, compared with 81.0 percent in the United States, 63.3 percent in France and 43.7 percent in South Korea.

The Specialist Committee has therefore recommended in its recent report that measures should be taken to give more social support to young families, especially at the time of the child's birth and when children are small. The government has accordingly decided that the child allowance should be increased. Patricia Boling in her paper on "Family Support Policies in Japan" has raised the question whether redistribution of costs is an effective measure for having more children (Boling 2002: 10). Child benefits and family allowances in European countries are not primarily a means to enhance the birthrate but are paid to families in order to compensate for the structural disadvantages that families are subjected to in comparison to married couples and other adults without children.

Another important factor that obviously has an influence on Japan's poor fertility rate is the fact that nearly 70 percent of respondents in Japan and South Korea said mothers mainly look after their preschool-age children, compared with 45.1 percent in France, 36 percent in the U.S. and just 6.8 percent in Sweden. According to a survey by Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research more than 80 percent of fathers with children less than a year old leave most of the children's upbringing to their wives, showing that there is still a strong imbalance in the sharing of household chores among mothers and fathers. Although the number of those who thought husbands should be equally burdened with domestic work and child care increased to 82.8 percent from 74 percent in a similar survey conducted in 1993, it is obvious that men are not able or willing to balance work and parental care. One of the

reasons is the work style in corporations that puts the largest burden of working hours on the shoulders of men in their 30s, the age bracket that is also supposed to have young children at home. Company restructuring and streamlining have led to even further lengthening of working hours, and the percentage of employees who work for more than 60 hours a week increased from 19 percent in 1994 to 23 percent in 2004. This trend clearly contradicts all efforts that try to enlarge the number of young men who want to jointly raise children with their wives.

4. The review of male work styles and the “company man” discourse

One reason that conservative parties have also agreed to support the passage of the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society was the argument that the law would help to ensure the necessary labor force supply. It is estimated that Japan in the years following 2007 will face a serious labor shortage due to the baby-boomers who will be reaching retirement age in great numbers and the ongoing decline in the country’s fertility rate. In order to mitigate the problem of labor shortage, Japanese society will have to increase the number of women participating in the work force. But as it is still difficult for women to balance work and family life in favor of the family and since more and more women are opting for a career and against having children, it is obvious that the work environment for working mothers has to be improved and that support systems have to be built up in order for women to combine having a family and keeping a job. Since double-income families are continuing to increase, the law is also targeting Japanese men, who will have to share domestic chores to a greater extent than they have done so far (Ōsawa 2002: 200).

Feminist scholars have criticized that the Basic Law for Gender Equality was not passed in order to enhance the rights and the social status of women but to better utilize the labor force of women for the revitalization of the Japanese economy. Nevertheless, however functional the government’s policies are meant to be, the agenda of “joint participation” opens the way for a serious reconsideration of men’s roles and male work styles. This is necessary because without correctly resolving the problems men are

facing in these issues, the current situation of family decline and fall of fertility rate is not likely to change.

The idea that balancing work and family has to be facilitated for both women *and* men leaves the question of how men are actually facing the issue of family-care work unanswered. Public opinion polls reveal that a growing number of younger men are willing to share household chores and child care but only very few men are actually taking child care leave or participate actively in family matters. According to a MHLW survey, female workers account for 97.1 percent of the workers actually taking child-care leave but male workers only for 2.9 percent (Cabinet Office 2005: 26). In order to close the gap between consciousness and reality, the most recent government measures are trying to encourage companies to improve the work environment for male employees and enable them to take family leave without seriously risking their career options. The “Law to Promote Support Structures for the Upbringing of the Next Generation” is aimed at rewarding companies with more than 301 employees with a “Next Generation Certificate Label” (*Jisedai nintei maaku*) if they manage to implement father programs successfully. This label can be placed on products and commercial advertising and functions in the same way as other quality labels, such as the Eco Mark in Japan. Those companies that want to apply for the certificates have to prove that a certain number of fathers took child-care leave. Long-working hours, a strong sense of customer care and a lack of substitute workers are the main obstacles that make child-care leave for fathers “unjustifiable” and leave those employees who are planning to apply at a loss about the extra burden they will be putting on their colleagues (Amano 2006: 1).

The critical review of male work styles has also been discussed in recent years in the context of economic restructuring and has led to a body of literature that can be called the “company man” discourse (Asahi, Shinbun and Shakaibu 1998, Fukuhara 2001, Miyata 2000, Miyata 2001, Mainichi Shinbun Tokubetsu Shuzaihan 2003, Tao 1996).

Due to the social imperative of the male breadwinner role, men were held responsible in the past for earning almost 100 percent of the family income. The company structures that have evolved in the last century and particularly in the period of high economic growth after the last war have set the standard of life-long employment

with one single company, to which male employees had to fully commit themselves “with all their strength.” The core of male identity consisted of a long-lasting personal bond to the corporation as a community of common destiny. The intense personal identification with the goals of one’s company was regarded as being typical for Japanese corporate men and came under critical review already in the 1970s. The then coined Japanese term *mōretsu shain*, literally meaning the “fiercely (working) company employee”, was the description of workaholic habits and a disposition among men to radically sacrifice their individual interests for the company’s benefit (Amano 2001: 47). The reason that this discussion had no impact on the reorganization of employment structures is to be seen in the then occurring oil embargo, which forced most large Japanese corporations to downsize and to cut costs by encouraging the reduced number of male core employees to work overtime. Economic restructuring in the 1970s was well suited to encouraging the idea of assuming the male psychological habit, whereby men naturally think that “work is primary” (*shigoto daiichi*) and that “the company is paramount (*kaisha wa daiji*)” for them. The phenomenon of male overworking originated secondly from a growing consumer society in Japan of the 1970s that led many individuals to direct their energies to enhancing their standard of living by buying durable consumer goods and taking out loans for real estate properties. Thirdly the period of high economic growth in the 1960s created the widespread “system of the male wage earner (*dansei kasegigata*),” according to which the family man is entirely responsible for the family income, a family model which additionally put male wage earners under severe pressure to focus their lives primarily on work (Amano 2001: 48).

These social processes obviously inhibited a differentiated political debate on the social aftereffects of the phenomenon of male overworking. However, in discussing the gender identity of Japanese men and their tendency to turn into company men almost as a matter of course, masculinity has to be understood as being the effect of a reciprocal relationship that focuses the housewife entirely on housework, education, care work and consumption, and the husband-breadwinner on excessive work performance on the job.

Corporate collectivity in the past supported male gender identity by referring to males as being the sole wage earner of the family, whereas now restructured corporations increasingly see them as individuals or single persons. Hand in hand with

this development is the obvious trend that working conditions for new employees are worsening. Many companies keep their older workforce in regular employment because these employees usually have families to support, whereas young people who live alone or with their parents are in a better position to accept low incomes in temporary jobs. In addition to this trend of low regular employment among young graduates, organizations apparently tend to pay reduced wages even for the newly employed salary men who in the past were expected to become the sole supporters of their families. Polarizing income differences in the Japanese labor market have arisen as a result of implementing the American efficiency/competence system in Japanese employment structures. The principle of efficiency is based on a guideline bearing the title “Japanese Management of a New Era” (*Shinjidai no nihonteki keiei*), which was proposed in 1995 by “Japan’s Federation of Employers” (*Nikkeiren*) and was heralded by Prime Minister Koizumi under the slogan “structural reform” (*kōzō kaikaku*) as the realization of the principle of the merit-based system (*seikashugi*) (Morinaga 2003: 136).

The head of Nikkeiren’s labor law division claimed that “the transformation Japan must make in its industrial structure requires the flexibilization of people (*hito ga ryūdōka*)” (Gordon 2002: 126). But since the economic qualification for men to marry is still seen in terms of being able to support a family from the income of the husband/father, the polarization of incomes has already produced a significantly growing rate of single males in Japanese society (Yamada 2006: 23).

5. Local policies and equal participation of men in housework

Since the national machinery to implement a gender-equal society has set out its agenda, not only the central government but many local authorities and organizations all over Japan have also been actively involved, since the mid-1990s and even earlier, in setting a course for the joint participation of women and men in society.

The demand for “participation of men” in child care and household affairs is clearly reflected in activities organized by local volunteer projects with the intention that both men and women should share the responsibilities for the benefit of as well as the burden of society. Voluntary services which target men are in many cases offered by Gender Equality Centers and members of the so-called pro-feminist men’s liberation movement in Japan. Nakamura Akira is one of the protagonists who formed the first Men’s Liberation Group in Osaka in 1991 together with a very small group of associates (Nakamura 1995). The group developed into a center in 1995 and became the model for other men’s centers founded thereafter in some of Japan’s bigger cities as well as towns and villages. The centers engage in different kinds of activities such as counseling, information gathering and organizing meetings for men. In 2005 the 10th Men’s festival was held in Osaka where the members of different kinds of men’s organizations came together to celebrate, exchange information and give each other support. Japan anthropologist Romit Dasgupta gives a well documented account on the manifold activities of these men liberation movements and the topics they discuss on internet websites (Dasgupta 2003: 113ff).

Japanese men’s lib is not a political mass movement but rather comprises different kinds of small groups that are eager to raise the consciousness of male citizens with respect to gender-related issues and to establish therapeutically oriented self-help groups for men in distress, either through the internet or by offering hotline telephone services. The booklets published by men’s centers of local communities in Japan regularly include personal statements of men relating their experience and how it has changed their gender consciousness (Makino 2001, Menzu Sentaa 1996, Menzu Sentaa 1997, Menzu Ribū Tōkyō 1997). There is a variety of opinions on gender in the reports. For one individual it was the burden of the traditional expectations of a first-born son that led him to question what masculinity is; other members mentioned their

experiences raising children or caring for elderly parents (Yokohama Women's Association 1998).

Many Gender Equality Centers hold seminars for men who are approaching retirement. The plan is to provide men in Japan with the outlook and methods for making a soft-landing into the home and community after many years of living a life completely centered on their work.

6. Intellectuals and gender education in the mass media

The activities of the Gender Equality Centers are closely connected with academic research in the field of gender studies. Feminist researchers and female scholars active in gender studies have opened the field for the study of men and masculinity in their publications and encouraged male colleagues to participate (Ehara/Inoue/Ueno 1995, Nishikawa/Ogino 1999). The Japanese sociologist Itō Kimio has become the most representative male figure in the field of research, both as a scholar in Japan's men's studies as well as an activist in the men's liberation movement in Japan. Itō is also a very popular figure in the public media since having assigned himself the mission of opening educational institutions to men's studies. He is one of the first university professors to start teaching courses in men's studies at the universities of Osaka and Kyoto, which he has been offering since 1992 and continuously publishes popular scientific works on the subject (Itō 1993, 1996, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, Itō/Fujitani 1997, Itō/Muta 1998, Itō/Kimura/Kuninobu 2002).

In recent years public education in men's life styles and masculinity concepts has also become very popular in the Japanese mass media. For example the broadcasting federation NHK launched, in one of its popular television lectures bearing the title "human lectures" (*ningen kōza*), a course on the subject of men's studies called "The Myth of Masculinity" (*Otokorashisa to iu shinwa*) held by the ever present Itō Kimio in eight sessions, broadcast on daytime TV from August until October 2003. The seminar has also been published in a printed version (Itō 2003a). In the TV course Itō lectured firstly on the cultural history of masculinity in Japan, including such topics as

the feminized male hero or the men who cooked and cared for their children in pre-modern Tokugawa society. Secondly he tried to clarify the social causes for contemporary male domestic violence and the dramatically increased suicide rate amongst middle-aged and older Japanese men. Thirdly he made reference to the autonomy of men that is required to solve contemporary society's problems as shown in examples of house-husbands and by illustrating popular figures in private life, such as John Lennon and he himself as being active in child-care. And finally he has tried to raise awareness for the international and Japanese local men's liberation movement.

In the very last series, which covers the topic "Men's Lifestyles in the 21st Century – A Promotion of Men's Autonomy" Itō introduces a checklist by which men – or women vicariously for the man with whom they cohabit – can check to see if they master the 20 basic techniques of being "able to care for oneself" (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Checklist from NHK television lecture “The Myth of Masculinity” (20 basic techniques of being “able to care for oneself”)

1. Knowing how to use a vacuum cleaner	2. Knowing how to prepare 8 different kinds of meals without referring to a cookbook
3. Knowing how to cook rice	4. Cleaning up after meals at least 5 times per week
5. Knowing how to set the controls of household electrical appliances	6. Frequently cleaning the toilet and bathroom
7. Having several close friends outside the work place	8. Regularly hanging the washing on the line
9. Knowing how to fill in documents for the authorities	10. Ironing your (white) shirts by yourself
11. Frequently preparing tea to drink by yourself	12. As a rule buying your clothes by yourself
13. Being able to prepare the ingredients for a meal when eating alone	14. Having knowledge of least one problem in your neighborhood
15. Frequently going shopping at the supermarket by yourself	16. Reading the circulars of the community council etc.
17. Frequently taking the garbage to the collection point	18. Having a personal hobby
19. Knowing where to find your suits, ties, shoes and socks	20. At least 10 persons in your neighborhood with whom you are acquainted

Source: Itō (2003a)

The somewhat amusing side of the checklist with regard to the managing of everyday affairs has a serious background in so far as in recent years many men of the older generation, who usually have no experience in household affairs, have fallen into considerable distress after their wives divorced them, became bedridden or died. The traditional family role model generally assumed the elderly husband would be the first to become ill or bedridden and therefore would be nursed by his wife. Nowadays the number of elderly husbands who have become nurses to their sick wives or their geriatric parents is continuously growing – which has shown that men too must bear the burden of non-paid social work.

In one of his academic publications Itō has also accused Japan’s younger men of “being unable” to manage social affairs and of being dependent on their wives and explains different ways for men to become independent and concerned about social affairs. He holds the view that the dependency of Japanese men – which is not defined

as a financial or economic dependency but as a psychological one – originates both in the Japanese welfare system and Japanese employment practices (Itō 2002).

7. Conclusion

With the total fertility rate reaching a new record low in 2005, it appears likely that Japan's population will continue to decline. Sixteen years have passed since the "1.57 shock," when the declining youth population was first recognized as a social problem, and 11 years have passed since the government began implementing measures, including projects called "Angel Plans," to stop the trend. It was first suggested that increasing the number of childcare facilities and reducing the burden of childcare would be sufficient to reverse the trend that ever more women are shying away from marriage and bearing children. In order to improve the social environment for women, the government plans to enhance day-care center accommodation and arrange a working environment that is supportive of women who are working and raising children. By implementing the extension of non-family childcare facilities the government also acknowledged the fact that, due to changes in the labor market, dual-income couples are increasing and the standard family of housewife and breadwinner is on the decline; nevertheless the "Basic Direction of Policies to Support Child-Rearing in the Future" was mainly focused on the situation of women and on eliminating the number of women who have to drop out of the work force after marrying or giving birth.

Although the government's measures for Japan's declining fertility rate are closely linked with efforts to achieve more gender equality, only the "plus one" measures for low fertility that the MHLW compiled in 2002 were seriously concerned about the lack of the husband's involvement in home work and childcare. The MHLW suggested that the circumstances surrounding marriage and childrearing are directly connected with Japan's corporate culture and that a "reexamining of work styles including those of males" is a prerequisite for any substantial improvement in social systems and practices. In addition, worsened employment opportunities and the demise

of employment practices that supported male full employment and the male wage earner model have ongoing consequences for the generation that should be raising children.

I conclude that the measures proposed by the Specialist Committee for the upbringing of the next generation best reflect the fact that the falling birthrate is not for the most part induced by a change in the minds of women but is due to structural factors that are influencing individual decisions in both sexes. However, the question remains as to whether the breakdown in the middle class gendered division of labor will induce the Japanese government to create a family policy that thoroughly addresses this change.

The government's most recent proposals worked out by the Specialist Committee seem to aim primarily at redistributing the costs of childcare by increasing the amount of child benefits and providing systems for alleviating childrearing burdens such as support for building houses that can accommodate three-generation households (*The Japan Times* 15.06.2006). The political course to reconstitute the traditional family model is clearly expressed in these outlines. It also shows concern for lowering the government's financial burden and a general attempt among leading politicians to vitalize conservative values in the Japanese society. It seems as if the LDP policies for a society with a declining birthrate contradict more and more the framework of gender equality, from which they originate.

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