

Sciences sociales du Japon contemporain II : Politiques dans le Japon contemporain (JAP5BO5C /44REO7JP)

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Pioneers of gender change? New Japanese Fathers between Home and Work

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Introduction

Japan's birth rate hit 1.57 % in 1989, the lowest figure since it started to decline. It was even lower than that of the Year of the Fire Horse, *hinoe uma* of 1966 but still, it continues falling down. In Japan, it is not very common for women to have children without being married; the numbers show a small increase since the 1950s from 0.8 to 2.5 % of women who give birth while being single. However, the marriage rates are also decreasing in recent years. This is due to the fact that more people choose to stay either single or get married late. This certainly affects the fertility rate in Japan. A lot of women are in fact hoping to get married and have children. Many of them have a job and seek to attain a higher level in their career. What holds them back from marriage is that they know the current social systems are not enough to support their lives as working mothers.

New fathers and *ikumen*

Childcare leave has been usually taken only by mothers but since very recent years, people are starting to think that men should also take it. The data shows that only 2 - 3% of men actually take childcare leave in Japan which is extremely low compared to the western countries. Furthermore, the common duration of the paternity leave ranges from only several days to a few weeks. However, the real problem is not about this short period of paternity leave, but about the reasons why men do not take the childcare leave. Indeed they feel pressure from their bosses and feel guilty about taking a "break"; many worry about losing their posts after returning to the office; they have a "conservative" boss who does not understand the necessity of paternity leave and so on. Moreover, childcare is not, for some people, considered "urgent" unlike taking care of elderly people; therefore, many older men with higher status tend not to let their employees take their childcare leave.

Iku-men is a term created after the slang, "Ike-men", meaning "a good-looking or a cool man"; an abbreviation of Iketeru-menzu (cool men). This new term Iku-men refers to a man who actively participates in child-rearing since Iku is taken from a word, iku-ji, meaning "looking after children." So, "Iku-men" connotes that a father who can act like this is "cool." This term appears in the early 2000s and has been popularized since then. There is an aim to increase awareness about the importance of men sharing housework and child-rearing with

mothers. This movement looks very Japanese; however, around the period of the economic boom, men are thought to work outside and women inside of the house; the model of men as salaryman and women as housewives. This model still continues in one sense, but since the government officially declared the support for the women's social promotions, this model started not working very well anymore. More women are looking for men who are willing to share the housework so that they do not have to give up on their careers. Once again, this conflict of women between work and home slows down their decisions on becoming wives and mothers. To improve the birth rate, it is crucial for people to get married. Recently, there are many advertisements, dramas and films made by huge companies like Shiseido and Hakuhōdō depicting “cool dads” using famous actors, and so even some of them are far from the typical good daddy image.

NPO Fathering Japan

The boom of Iku-men started with Mr. Ando Tetsuya, who is a founder of NPO Fathering Japan. This nonprofit organization aims to increase more “Smiling dads” rather than “good fathers.” According to Ando, if fathers change, the society will change. The concept of “smiling father” is that a smile shows his happiness in his family and supposedly his family members are also happy. The relationship with family affecting the relationship with others, it will eventually brighten the society. Fathering means taking responsibility for raising a child, so this organization aims to educate young fathers and future fathers on how to “be” a father. Being a father does not only mean bringing money into the home but rearing the children as well. Many salarymen are assigned a huge amount of work and they feel sometimes obliged to stay in the office until late at night, so they are often absent in the house. Because of this, even if they want to participate in childcare, many of them do not know what to do. With this NPO Fathering Japan, there are cooking lessons, how to play with kids, and most importantly, lectures by Mr. Ando about why fathers also have to participate. Many fathers think they are “helping” mothers but child-rearing and housework are not something to help with but to share. Ando wants to make men think by themselves about how they can be part of their families as fathers. As such, he advises that there is no right answer or correct way of childcare, so he encourages his “students” to create their own happy family. Like Ando, many Japanese men think that they do not want to be like their own fathers, that is, fathers of the older generation are not good role models for many men in Japan. Although the gender models for men and women still exist strongly in Japan, the younger generation seeks a change in the gender roles and eventually hopes to change the society.

NPO Fathering Japan has organized a lot of projects to increase more smiling fathers and one of their distinct projects is the “Iku-Boss” project. Like Iku-men, it is a term created and now this term refers to a boss who is willing to support his employees in order to become able to manage their lives between the office and home. As Dr. Goldstein-Gidoni already asserted, workers in Japan feel a huge pressure from their companies and regardless of them wanting to take a paternity leave, they are not basically able to, because of their bosses. Therefore, this project directs this idea toward workers with high status all over Japan and asks them to officially refer to themselves as “Iku-Boss.” This initiative is called “the declaration of Iku-Boss.” We can see how many people have already declared themselves as Iku-Boss on the website and there are even some mayors of certain cities included. Thus this organization educates both older and younger fathers.

Abe government family policy

Japanese Prime Minister Abe has proposed a work-style reform in order for all the population of Japan to become “active,” especially to make women “shine” as they can fully enjoy their activities. This reform includes a policy on improving the working environment for women and elderly people. However, his ideas have contradictory aspects. On one hand, he promotes women in the workplace, but on the other, he suggests that the Japanese family should be “traditional” like it used to be; that is to say, men as salarymen and women as housewives. However, this family model is not traditional at all; it only started after the economic boom when men could gain much more than now and jobs were more stable than those of nowadays. As Dr. Goldstein-Gidoni pointed out, Abe needs women to shine because he wants them to get married. Promoting women's social activities is admirable but there is a need for more policies and systems that enable both men and women to balance their lives at the office and home. One of the policies of the work-style reform is the project of Premium Friday. On the last Friday of a month, workers are suggested to leave the office at 3 pm. The aim is to enjoy the weekend with families and spend more money. This project is not an obligation and not many companies have accepted and started the practice. Some men are even called “Furari-man”, meaning a salaryman wandering and not knowing what to do. It is taken from a verb, wander around in Japanese, fura fura suru, just because their wives do not want them to come back home so early; wives feel that without being helpful at home, the husbands are only equivalent to just another big baby who sits there doing nothing. The Premium Friday project does not seem to be working very well so far.

Dr. Goldstein-Gidoni refers to a Japanese gender role problem as the metaphorical gender contract, which reflects, once again, men as salarymen or a “daikoku bashira”, a central pillar to support a family's finance, and women as housewives who take care of all the housework including child-rearing and as “protectors” of home. Since the economic boom, this gender contract has become a norm and the social systems have changed according to this model supposedly thought to be ideal. Because of this, the social systems of these days are already outdated. The recent problems, such as many children on a waitlist to enter a nursery due to the low number of establishments and caregivers, and young fathers feeling guilty about taking childcare leave, stem from the fact that the older generations thought that mothers should stay at home and look after their children. Well, in fact, not only the older generation but also the younger generation tends to think that this model is somehow favorable. In addition, many young men still consider the housework as a woman's job and there are several articles about the conflict between young wives and husbands. There seem to be many problems to solve; however, like Dr. Goldstein-Gidoni pointed out, even only the idea of fathering did not appear 15 years ago, and like Mr. Ando of NPO Fathering Japan, there is a slight change in the concept of gender roles. We can also see a difference in that a lot of projects keep on coming up from this organization and spread all over Japan.

Conclusion

The central theme of Dr. Goldstein-Gidoni's presentation is summarized in this question: “Can the new fathers really be the pioneers of gender change?” The answer is neither a definite yes or no, but any gender movement in the world that happened in the past has always started with women. Women are usually aware of inequalities and they fight for better lives. Men are the ones who usually create the rules in societies, so they actually hold the key to change. The new fathers in Japan are moving on to a next stage of fathering.