

Thinking About the 2025 Problem—Part 4: Thinking about Men’s Participation in Childcare

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Without a doubt, a fundamental policy in handling population issues involves countermeasures to the low birth rate. This paper will consider the participation of men in childcare, one of the pillars of the measures to cope with the declining birth rate.

The critical significance of the birthrate around the year 2025

This series offers analyses from a variety of different perspectives, primarily focusing on the population issues that Japan will face around the year 2025. The main arguments put forward in this series are that large numbers of the baby boomer generation will enter the advanced elderly life stage around 2025, which will bring about multiple issues, and that 2025 may also be a crucial turning point in terms of the measures taken against the declining birth rate.

Here are some of the basics: The total fertility rate in Japan (the average number of children born to one woman during her lifetime, hereafter simply “fertility rate”) was 1.46 in 2015. This is considerably below the replacement level fertility rate (the fertility rate needed to keep the population from decreasing), which is 2.07. In other words, if this rate stays where it is now, Japan’s population will continue to decline in absolute terms.

One typical population projection for Japan from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research provides three hypothetical variants concerning the future fertility rate: high, medium, and low. With the medium fertility variant, which is often used as the standard case, the fertility rate is projected to be 1.33 in 2025 and 1.35 in 2050. With the high fertility variant, a fertility rate of 1.60 is projected for both 2025 and 2050. These rates will not stop the population decline or even meet the government’s target of stopping population decline before the population falls below 100 million.

What does the government think of this? The interim report on discussion by the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, Expert Panel, and the Committee for Japan’s Future, “Choice for the Future” (May 2014), which was the origin of this 100 million population goal, says the following about the relationship between population size and

fertility rates: “Even if the total fertility rate quickly recovers to the replacement rate of fertility of 2.07 by 2030 and maintains that level thereafter, Japan’s total population is estimated to decline to approximately 106 million in 50 years, and it would take about 80 years from now for the depopulation to finish.”

For this decline in population to be stopped, the fertility rate will need to reach 2.07 at some point. The longer it takes for the fertility rate to reach 2.07, the smaller the constant level of the population size will become. This means that to stop this decline and keep the population above 100 million, the fertility rate will need to reach 2.07 by around 2030.

“Japan’s Plan for Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens,” created by the Cabinet in June 2016 posits a target fertility rate of 1.8. This target fertility rate is the rate that would make it possible for all young people who so wish to marry, and for all people who want to have children, to have the number of children they desire after marriage. Even that would be rather difficult to achieve, however, and even if it were possible, the fertility rate would not grow to 2.07, so the population would continue to decrease.

What can be done? Japan’s Plan for Engaging All Citizens does not address this, but the December 2014 Cabinet decision entitled “Vision for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan” lays out a plan “for maintaining a population of 100 million” by raising the “fertility rate to 1.6 in 2020, 1.8 in 2030, and to the replacement level (2.07) in 2040.” This is the vision for the fertility rate as laid out by the government. There is a considerable gap, however, between this vision and the fertility rates projected by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

Will the fertility rate in 2025 rise to what the government predicts? Or will it continue to stay low, as the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research has forecast? The answer will only reveal itself in time.

Gender equality in childcare and reforming the way we work

To achieve the fertility rate growth laid out by the government, a great deal of energy needs to be put into measures against population decline. One of the most fundamental directions is to promote gender equality when it comes to childcare. Here’s why:

From an economic point of view, it is thought that people decide how many children to have by comparing and weighing the benefits versus the costs of having children. One factor that economists often focus on in this decision is the cost to women of raising children. This cost includes not only ordinary labor, emotional labor, and burdens in terms of time but also the opportunity cost that comes with raising children. Opportunity cost in this context is the value of potential earnings women forego to engage in childcare.

Naturally, when there is little participation in child-rearing on the part of men, that burden is shifted toward women, costing women even more.

I want to use data to explore this situation. First, we can see that the participation of men in childcare has an impact on whether couples have more than one child. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare's "13th Longitudinal Survey of Adults in the 21st Century" (2014), the percentage of couples who have a second child is 9.8% when the number of hours the husband spends daily on housework and child-rearing is zero. For couples in which the man spends up to two hours, this percentage goes up to 33.0%, and when the husband spends six hours or more on childcare, this rate rises to 84.5%.

Men's participation in housework and child-rearing in Japan, however, is considerably lower than that in most other developed nations. According to "A 2016 Declining Birthrate White Paper" from the Cabinet Office, the number of hours that fathers with children age five or younger spend involved in housework and child-rearing (per day) is 3.21 in Sweden, 3.12 in Norway, 3.0 in Germany, and 2.58 in the United States. This number is distressingly low for Japan, however, at 1.07.

The government is aware of this fact and has clearly stated that "the lack of involvement of men in housework and child-rearing is one of the causes for the declining birth rate" in the March 2015 Cabinet decision entitled "Outline of Measures to Cope with Society with Declining Birthrate." In order for measures against the declining birth rate to be successful, gender equality will be necessary when it comes to child-rearing.

The typical Japanese patterns of full-time employment after graduation, long-term employment, seniority-based wages, and lack of clearly defined work tasks also increase the costs of child-rearing for women, including the opportunity cost. Here are some of the things that happen:

1. In Japan, once an employee leaves a company, it is extremely difficult to obtain the same type of regular employment again. This means that it becomes extremely difficult for women to choose whether to continue employment or to leave for the purpose of raising children because of the significant opportunity cost that comes with leaving employment.

2. Under the system of long-term employment that has been the norm in Japan, women who re-enter the workforce after child-rearing usually do so as part-timers (non-regular employees), and when wages are determined by seniority, those for part-time jobs are considerably lower than those for regular employment, further increasing the opportunity cost that women face in child-rearing.

3. With typical patterns of employment in Japan, labor adjustments are made by

changing the number of hours worked rather than the number of employees, meaning that long work hours are required during busy periods for the employer. This makes it difficult for men to participate in child-rearing, which in turn places a greater burden on women.

Considered another way, these employment patterns that are typical in Japan are patterns that are suited to men. Many of these characteristics of Japanese employment can only be fully taken advantage of by men. This means that we not only need to work toward gender equality in child-rearing but also that we need to change these male-centric employment patterns.

The current state of childcare leave for men and its limits

One symbol of gender equality in child-rearing is childcare leave for men. If men are able to take time off from work to participate in child-rearing in the same way that women are, it will cost women less to raise children. The “Outline of Measures to Cope with Society with Declining Birthrate” mentioned above includes “encouraging men to take time off work directly after a child is born so that they may engage in child-rearing at that time” as one of its key tenets.

The Childcare Leave Act enacted in 1992, which granted leave to any worker—regardless of gender—with a child under one year of age for the purposes of providing childcare, was regarded as a landmark event. When it was first enacted, however, the system was hard economically on those who used it, because childcare leave was completely unpaid. A later revision made it possible for those taking leave under this law to receive a (tax-free) stipend covered by unemployment insurance and exempt from social security fee. In the latest revision to the Unemployment Insurance Law made in October 2014, one parent is now eligible to receive 67% of his or her wages (standard monthly remuneration) as a stipend for the first six months, or if both parents take childcare leave, each may receive 50% until the child is one year and two months old. Taking into account the exemptions from taxes and insurance payments, the actual benefits received end up amounting to roughly 80% of the wages parents were receiving prior to taking leave. The same revision also made it possible for parents to receive a childcare leave stipend while working if they work fewer than 80 hours in a month, meaning that they can receive more than 90% of their previous income. Given these provisions, Japan’s system for childcare leave has been praised as being on a level approaching that of developed nations in Europe, in terms of the system’s design.

The rate at which this system is utilized, however, is completely inadequate. Even the most recent results show that only 2.3% of men use childcare leave (according to the Basic Survey on Gender Equality in Employment, 2014). The length of leave taken by

men is also extremely short. A breakdown of the duration of childcare leave used reveals that the most common duration was “fewer than five days,” at more than 40%; with “five days or more but fewer than two weeks” in second place; and “fewer than one month” in third. Taken together, these three responses account for 75% of all responses. Any support that short-term leave of a week might provide still contributes almost nothing to lowering the cost for the woman.

One of the reasons why the rate at which men take childcare leave is so low is that there is no need to go to the trouble of taking leave in the first place if it is for so short a period of time. According to a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 47.6% of men take leave from work for the purpose of childcare, but the fact that 80% of men use annual leave instead of statutory childcare leave is one of the reasons why the rate of utilization of childcare leave is low. This means that the demand for time off work from men is being substantially met through the use of annual paid leave. As long as the majority of men’s needs for leave are for short-term leave, it is natural for them to choose to use their annual paid leave rather than using statutory childcare leave, for which they must go out of their way to apply.

In the Outline of Measures against Population Decline, the Cabinet Office has set the target of raising the rate at which men take childcare leave to 13% by 2020. Attention has often been placed on childcare leave for men in a social sense as well. Given the above, however, this type of leave currently has only symbolic importance, and next to no substantial effects can be expected. To take this a step further, we could say that right now it would be easy to achieve the target by simply replacing the annual paid leave taken by men for childcare with childcare leave, but that would mean nothing in terms of shifting the costs of having children toward a more equal share.

In order to lower the cost of raising children for women in a real sense through childcare leave for men, men need to take medium to long periods of childcare leave. The reason that is not possible is ultimately because economic gender equality has yet to be achieved.

There are many surveys that cover the reasons why men do not take childcare leave. The most common answers are: “It would have a significant impact on my job or workplace,” “The economic burden is too great,” “There is no need to take it,” “There is no one to take my place at work,” “The atmosphere doesn’t seem conducive to me taking leave,” and “My boss doesn’t understand.” It is clear in the context of current workplace patterns that such statements mean that there is a bigger impact on the workplace, a greater burden on household finances, and less understanding from bosses when men take leave as opposed to women. If these types of patterns in the workplace can be changed

for the better and the equal treatment of men and women becomes a matter of course, then more men will take childcare leave, thereby lowering the cost of child-rearing for women.

Even if these work patterns can be changed, the effects will not be seen until the system can be changed as well. Even if the system is changed, however, the effects will not be seen until the way people work can be changed as well. We need to encourage more men to take childcare leave by implementing reforms to both the systems and patterns of work simultaneously to see the effects of such reforms.

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