

Low Birthrate & Women: Viewed from Women's Psychological Development

By KASHIWAGI Keiko

Introduction

Since Japan was shocked in 1989 by the decline to 1.57 in its total fertility rate (the average number of children a woman bears in her lifetime), the low birthrate has been hotly discussed as a critical issue for our society. With a low fertility rate viewed as a problem which would shake the foundation of Japanese society by bringing about, among others, the collapse of its pension system and labor shortage, numerous measures have been taken to halt the decline in the birthrate. It is natural for the government to view the low birthrate as a problem, but its countermeasures have been largely ineffective. Why? It is because the government has been barking up the wrong tree in understanding its causes. The mechanisms that are driving down the birthrate are without doubt psychological problems and the work styles of men and women that are not in tune with societal changes. This has been made clear by studies in developmental psychology and family psychology.

"Population Revolution" Rather Than Low Birthrate

– From children as "gifts" to something one "makes"

Although the low birthrate has been a hot topic, what is more important is the change that has taken place in how children come into this world. For a long time, children were born as a result of a chain of events – marriage, sex (intercourse) and reproduction. Today, the linkage between sex and reproduction, and between marriage and sex has been severed. Now, children are products of parental decisions. Children are no longer "gifts," but something one "makes." Children have become the target of choice by parents. This "population revolution" is an epoch-making event in the history of mankind. While attention has been focused on the decline in the number of children, what is more important is the fact that whether or not a child will come into existence is now subject to the will of and decisions by parents, in particular wives. Thanks to advances of medicine,

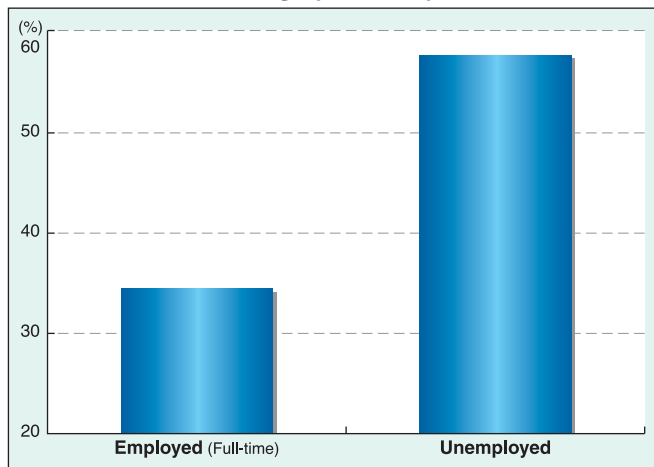
the infant mortality rate has declined (at 3 per 1,000, Japan boasts the lowest rate in the world). Today, parents can feel certain that children, once born, will reach adulthood. On the other hand, the need to give children high education (which is a natural corollary in an advanced, industrialized society) has encouraged parents to follow the strategy of having fewer children. The societal background behind the low birthrate of today is the fact that this strategy of having fewer children and bringing them up "well" has taken root.

Are Children "Treasures"?

– Value of children becoming increasingly relative

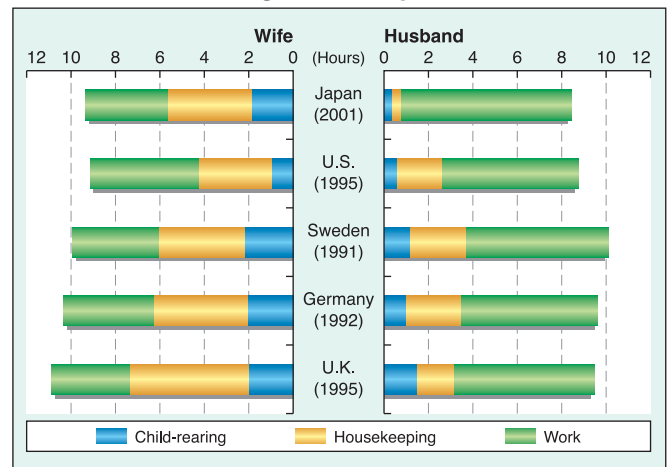
In Japan, it has always been said that "children are more precious than any gold, silver or jewel." If this saying still had held true, the birthrate would not have declined. The fact that the value of children is relative rather than absolute is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the value expected from children varies from country to country. As is the case

Chart 1 Difference of mother's stress from child-rearing by work style



Sources : Yokohama City Board of Education; Daycare Promotion Committee 2001, "Final Report on Daycare Service Research," Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology change in November 2006

Chart 2 Child-rearing hours spent by wife/husband during childcare period



Source : "Men's Childcare Leave (2004)," authored by Sato Hiroki & Takeishi Emiko (Chuko Shinsho paperback edition)

in any affluent industrialized nation, the Japanese look for psychological value in children. They say children “give meaning to one’s life,” “make a happy family” and “bond the couple.”

Nevertheless, children’s value is not absolute. Now that children have become objects of choice, people seriously consider whether they should have them. They carefully measure positive values that children may bring against negative values that having children may entail. In addition, they compare the value of having children against numerous factors, such as their work and the couple’s financial considerations and living standards, in deciding whether or not they will have children, and if so, when and how many. During the era when children were regarded as “gifts,” they were not subject to the will of and decisions by parents, as is the case today.

Why Have Or Not Have Children?

– Generational gaps in reasons

This situation is quite apparent when one studies the reasons people give for deciding to have children (*Ref. 1*). Older generations give importance to such reasons as “once one is married, it is the thing to do,” “the obligation to produce the next generation” and “to keep the family name and look after the family tomb.” Younger generations do not give these reasons so often. Instead, they cite

such factors as “we have fully enjoyed our life as a couple,” “professionally, I have reached the stage when I can have children,” and “I wanted to have children.” In deciding to have children, they give importance to their own lives and wishes. The value of children is no longer absolute. It is evident that for younger generations, having children is the result of a comparison between themselves and their children. Parents who opt to have no more than one child do so because they give priority to their own lives, saying, “I want to have time for myself,” “I don’t want to be overwhelmed by childcare any more” and the like.

Human Reproduction: Investment of Parental Resources

– A conflict of investing limited resources in oneself or in one’s child

One cannot condemn women feeling this way as being selfish. The reproduction of mankind as a mammal, including pregnancy, delivery and childcare, is an activity that requires investment of parental, especially maternal, resources. However, parental resources such as time, physical strength, nutrition and psychological energy are limited. These resources are necessary for reproduction and also for the subsistence and development (i.e. personal development through professional and other activities) of a mother herself. Before having

children, such resources are usually used for the subsistence and development of oneself. In having a child, a woman foresees the need to direct a great part of these resources to pregnancy, delivery and childcare. Hence, how to allocate these resources is a serious problem. Comparing children and oneself means exactly studying how to allocate the limited resources. It is natural for women to attach great importance to her own conditions, that is, her own subsistence and development.

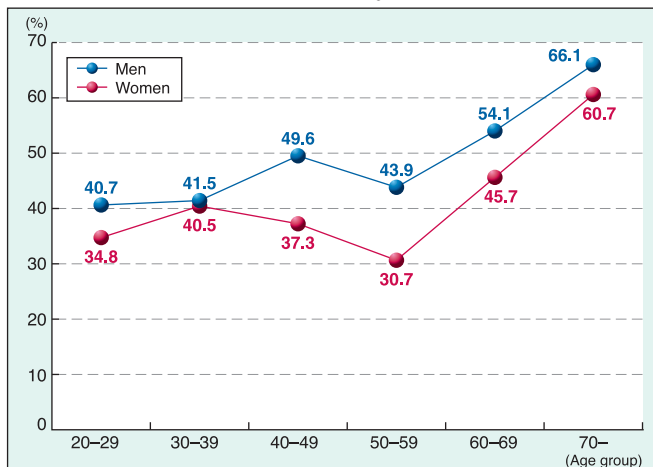
Anxiety over Childcare Strong in Japan:

A sign of lopsided resource allocation

When resource allocation is not adequate, with children taking a lion’s share of resources, mothers feel psychological conflict. Anxiety about childcare felt by mothers, which is very pronounced in Japan, is a clear sign of conflict felt over resource allocation. Although it is called anxiety about childcare, such uncertainty per se is small. It is mostly the kind of anxiety and frustration mothers feel about themselves as caregivers. Mothers say that during child-rearing, they “feel frustrated,” “feel impatient when they think of their own future,” “are unable to see their own future,” “have no contact with other adults” or “feel a gap with their husbands.”

Two factors that intensify childcare anxiety have been empirically confirmed.

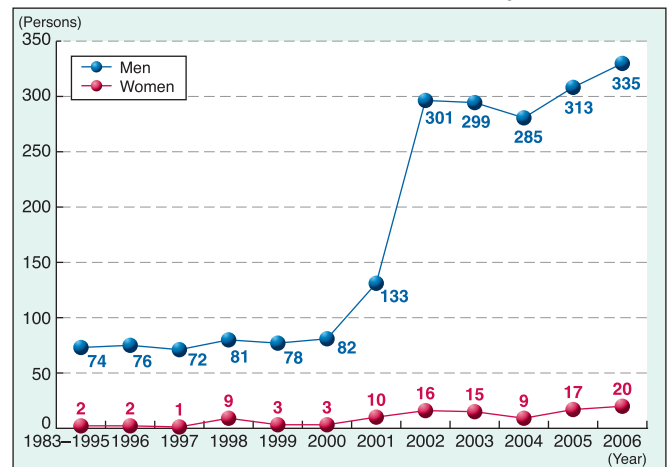
Chart 3 Ratio of views on the question “The husband should be the breadwinner, the wife should stay at home” (by sex & age group)



Note: The graph shows the ratio of ‘completely agree’ or ‘rather agree’ respondents on the question “The husband should be the breadwinner, the wife should stay at home” in the “Public Opinion Poll on a Gender-equal Society (2004),” Cabinet Office

Source: “International Comparison of Social Environments regarding Declining Birthrates & Gender Equality (2006),” Specialist Committee on Declining Birthrate & Gender Equality, Council for Gender Equality

Chart 4 Cases recognized as ‘karoshi’ (death from overwork), etc. by sex



Source: “Workers’ Accident Compensations over Brain/Heart Diseases & Mental Disorders,” Labor Standard Bureau, Ministry of Labor & Welfare

One is that it is felt more intensely by unemployed women who are full-time homemakers. Women's labor participation rate curve in Japan is characterized by an M-shape. This is because women quit their jobs when they have children. Sometimes, this is the decision of women themselves as they feel that "child-rearing should be in the hands of mothers." However, it often happens that even though women themselves want to continue working, they are directly or indirectly forced by their husbands or in-laws to quit their work on the grounds that "mothers should look after their children" (Ref. 2). Mothers who were forced to quit their work in this manner, in particular, feel very intense childcare anxiety. (Chart 1)

Today, most couples have only one or two children at most. The time one spends bringing up children is only a small portion of one's lifespan, which has become very long. After their children are grown, women still have many, many years to live. There, they need to live not as a mother or a wife, but as an individual. Human beings see the future, which determines how they feel at the moment. Although mothers love their children and feel child-rearing is an important role, they feel desperate anxiety and frustration about their future when they look at themselves immersed in childcare. This is a natural human reaction. Moreover, mothers of younger generations have professional and social experience after their graduation from school and have experienced the attainment and fulfillment of using their own capabilities. This knowledge of the meaning and fascination of living as an individual intensifies the sense of anxiety, discontent and frustration of being alienated from life as an individual – a person who is not just a mother or wife. The fact that mothers who work outside their homes do not suffer so much from childcare anxiety despite their busy life is because they are living as individuals, that is, they are allocating their resources to themselves as well. The fact that mothers who quit their jobs because "mothers should look after their children" suffer from childcare anxiety suggests that the concept that women/mothers should bring up their children is no longer valid.

Fathers' Absence Intensifying Mothers' Childcare Anxiety – Fathers' role in mankind a product of evolution

The second factor that intensifies mothers' childcare anxiety is the absence of fathers in child-rearing. When fathers join with mothers to raise their children, mothers are able to remain psychologically stable. On the other hand, when fathers hardly participate in childcare, their spouses feel intense childcare anxiety (Ref. 3).

This phenomenon is grounded on evolution. Child-rearing of mankind takes an exceptionally long time and involves many nurturing tasks. Since it is impossible for the mother to fulfill these difficult tasks single-handedly, the father's role in mankind is not just to provide sperm but to stay with the mother and child to participate in its upbringing. Hence, the father's role in mankind is a result of evolution, which is based on a strategy to successfully perform the difficult task of bringing up children. The absence of the necessary and important father in bringing up children puts excessive pressure on mothers, who must perform these difficult tasks alone. Its outcome is childcare anxiety.

Japanese fathers are among the worst in the world in terms of participation in childcare. This means the absence of fathers who have become necessary and important through evolution. It is natural that this is causing the problem of childcare anxiety and dysfunction. (Chart 2)

Fathers' Absence Means Loss of Husband/Wife Partnership

The failure of fathers to fulfill their family responsibilities, including their participation in bringing up their children, forces the wives to feel a sense of alienation from and inequality with their husbands. Compared with older couples who tied the knot through arranged marriages, younger couples who have married because of love are similar in their academic background, age and capability. However, once their child arrives, husbands become nominal fathers, devoting their lives entirely to work, while wives are caught in the humdrum of household and childcare chores. Wives are isolated from the wider world of work. This is

why they feel a sense of alienation. It also breaks down the partnership between husband and wife and is serving as a backdrop for the recent increase in divorces among long-married couples.

Are Japanese Men Happy?

Japanese men (i.e. husbands) are by no means happy, either. Japan is known for its long work hours and low labor efficiency. Under these circumstances, men who suffer from depression and are unable to report to work or drop dead from *karoshi* (death from overwork) are on the increase. (Charts 3,4) Here it should be pointed out that most of those who suffer *karoshi* are men, although women actually work longer hours than men. Women are responsible for housework and childcare in addition to their work outside their homes. Without doubt, they are overworked, but they do not drop dead because of it! Why? Industrial psychology has proved that engaging in multiple tasks of different nature (i.e. paid work and household work) contributes to good mental health. Men's lives devoted solely to paid work are firmly on their path to *karoshi* while women's involvement in both work outside their homes and household work gives them immunity from *karoshi*.

It is imperative that the Japanese government, which is promoting "gender equality in all spheres of life" and "the balance between work and personal life," squarely see this reality. **J.S**

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