

# Raising Awareness of Work / Life Balance

## Aiming at Halting Birthrate Decline

By *Joanna Sook Ja PARK*

Japan's total fertility rate sagged to 1.57 per woman in 1989 in what is known as the "1.57 shock." It was shocking because the rate was the lowest in postwar years and lower than the 1.58 registered in the last "Year of the Fiery Horse" (1966), when young couples avoided producing offspring because of the superstition that girls born in the Fiery Horse year, coming once in every 60 years, are said to bring destruction on their husbands. But the birthrate further dropped to a record low 1.26 in 2005. It rose to 1.32 in 2006, but the recovery appears a temporary phenomenon caused by an increase in births by women who are children of baby-boomer parents.

The decline in Japan's birthrate is not a trend of the 1990s but one that had already manifested itself in 1975 when the birthrate dropped below 2.0. Since then, the rate has been almost continually falling for more than 30 years. At the same time, the rate of both males and females not marrying is on the rise. On the other hand, the rate of working women in Japan has remained at the lowest level among industrial countries because a large number of working women quit jobs for childbirth.

To address the situation, the Japanese government has been accelerating support to child-rearing, including the introduction of childcare leave and expansion of nursery facilities, so that women may find it easier to do both work and family duties. But the measures have hardly taken effect in reality, with the birthrate continuing to fall.

### Childcare Support Alone Not Enough

From around 1965 to around 1985, the birthrate dropped almost uniformly in leading industrial countries. After that, the birthrate varied from country to country. In 1984, for example, the United States, France and Japan had the

same fertility rate, 1.81. The US and French rates have since been rising and now stand above 2.0, while Japan's rate has plunged to a level of around 1.3.

Government support for childcare is not adequate in the United States but well established in France. Japan is in between. The Netherlands is another country where childcare support is not sufficient, but its fertility rate is quite high -1.73 in 2002. It is generally understood in Japan that childcare support is the most important factor in addressing the birthrate decline. But the realities in other countries show that childcare support and the birthrate are not necessarily related to each other. It seems that the birthrate difference in leading industrial countries does not result from the level of childcare support but from some other factors.

I feel it essential to closely study the job and family situations and examine labor and family policies from an overall viewpoint if women are to undertake both jobs and household work. In Japan, the government focuses only on childcare. This is why a large number of women find themselves hard pressed to maintain both jobs and household work after childbirth. Also, we must not overlook the reality that an increase in the number of contract workers and longer working hours of full-time employees in the Japanese labor market have led the decline in childbirths to accelerate.

### Gender Equality in Work/Family Vital

A comparison between Japan and other countries shows that those with high birthrates such as Scandinavian countries, France and the United States have something in common.

Firstly, countries with high birthrates have a high level of gender equality both in the workplace and at home. Generally speaking, the ratio of working women is high in these countries. In

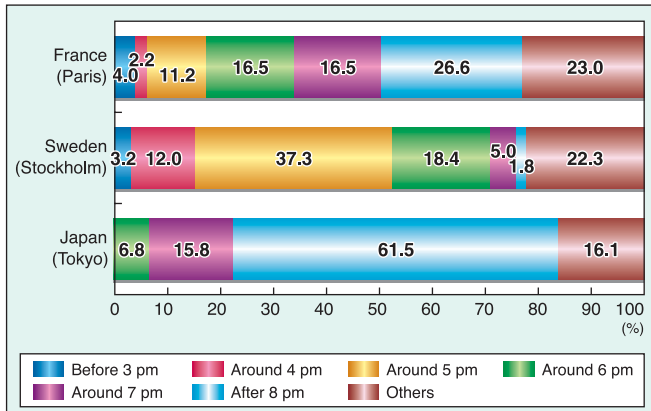
addition, the division of work between men and women in the workplace and at home is less fixed. The equality of job opportunities at companies such as recruitment, training and promotion has become a norm. At the same time, the income gap between men and women has narrowed as workers are paid on the basis of their contributions measured by capability and performance regardless of gender or age. At home, men share household duties and childcare to practice equality between sexes. In countries with high birthrates, women are joining the workforce in increasing numbers, while at the same time men increasingly share household work. Put another way, the time men spend on household chores lengthened as the ratio of working women rose.

The 2002 US National Study of Changing Workforce showed the time American men spent on household work became 42 minutes longer than 25 years ago, while that for American women became 42 minutes shorter. According to a report on internationally compared social environments regarding birthrates and gender equality released by the Japanese government in 2005, Swedish men accounted for 37.7% of the total time spent by couples on homemaking and childcare, American men 37.0%, Frenchmen 34.3% and Dutch men 31.8%. The ratio was the lowest in Japan at 12.5%.

In Japan, men are not blamed for staying away from housekeeping and other family responsibilities because all they supposedly have to do is to earn a living. In the Western world, however, men have no such excuse or privilege and even those in managerial posts have to do household duties at least a couple of hours a day.

In countries where both the ratio of working women and the birthrate are high, women's participation in the workforce has directly changed the way men work and live. It must be noted that

Chart 1 Men's time to go home in 3 cities



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

unless men share household work, neither the female job rate nor the birthrate can, rather than will, rise. No country has a high birthrate if the roles of men and women in work and family lives are fixed in the traditional way.

In Japan, where men and women are not yet equal either in the workplace or at home, birth translates into a high household burden on women. In other words, Japanese men cannot assume family responsibilities because of their work commitments, forcing women to take on heavy housekeeping and childcare burdens. This in turn makes it difficult for women to continue working after childbirth.

### High Work Flexibility for Regular Employees

Another distinctive feature of the countries with high birthrates is that full-time work is highly flexible.

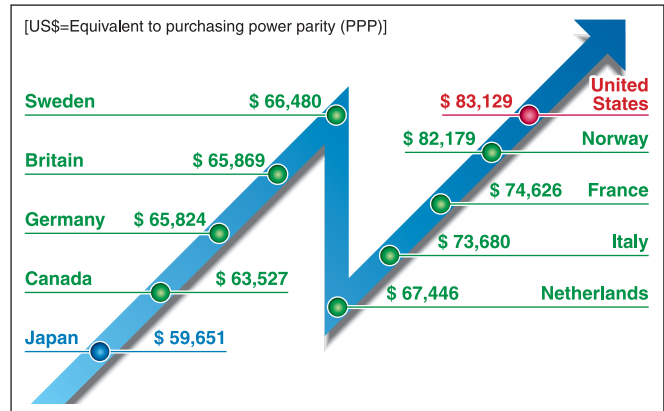
Western countries with high birthrates have introduced various flexible working systems, such as work-sharing among full-time employees, flextime and stay-home work. This is in stark contrast to Japan where the flexible working system means an increase in the number of low-paid contract employees. The Netherlands is one example. Even if nursing facilities are not available, Dutch working couples go to the office on four staggered days a week, for instance, under a work-sharing system and the parent off duty takes care of their children, limiting the use of nursing facilities to three days a week. Working couples

in the United States and Britain make their jobs compatible with family life by taking advantage of flextime and telework. In Scandinavian countries, likewise, the ratio of husbands doing household work is very high and they share the burden of childcare with their wives.

In contrast, regrettably, it is taken for granted in Japan that full-time employees work long hours and even on weekends, and sometimes live apart from their family members when they are transferred elsewhere (Chart 1). The rigid men-centered working environment that assumes wives as full-time homemakers has remained unchanged in Japan since the high-growth period of the 1950-70s. But, for women to work and do household duties at the same time, husbands must cooperate with their wives by assuming family responsibilities. Regrettably, this is what is most missing in Japan.

Japanese men's greatest concern is probably that their participation in household work would adversely affect their jobs. It must be noted, however, that compared with Japan, labor productivity is higher in Scandinavian countries, the United States, the Netherlands and other nations where men vigorously participate in household work as well as in local and volunteer activities. Men's participation in household work does not adversely affect their jobs, but rather makes them aware of limited work time, cuts wasteful work in the workplace and enhances time control capabilities, which in turn enhance their country's productivity as a whole. In fact, statistics show

Chart 2 Labor productivity (2004)



Source: "International Comparison of Labor Productivity (2006)," Japan Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development

that countries where couples cooperate in childcare have high birthrates and high labor productivity (Chart 2).

The prevalent trend and statistics in high-birthrate countries tell us that even in Japan men can achieve job/homemaking compatibility – performing well in the workplace while sharing family responsibilities – if they change their working style. The key to Japanese women balancing their work with household duties lies in the willingness to act for the compatibility on the part of their husbands. Men's awareness and action as well as a change in their working style are the most important factors that will enable women to take jobs and manage household work at the same time.

But whether a woman gets married and gives birth depends on her individual sense of value. Getting married and having children are not necessarily the aim of women's life. There is no quick remedy to solve the birthrate decline. It seems to me that the ultimate goal for Japan is to build not simply a society where having children and rearing them are easy, but an affluent society in which there are no fixed roles for men and women in burden sharing, individuals are respected whether or not they are married or have children, and everyone can live feeling happy. In such a society people will find it easy to get married and raise children, which in turn will eventually boost the country's birthrate. JS

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