

Population

By Takashima Hatsuhsa

On Dec. 1, 2001, into Japan's Imperial Family, a princess was born. The first child of Crown Prince Naruhito and his wife, Princess Masako, the new baby is a very healthy girl, 48cm in height and weighing 3,102g at birth. She was apparently so lively that people in the corridors outside the room could hear her crying. The baby was given the name, Toshinomiya Aiko. The Chinese characters used were taken from a phrase from the Chinese philosopher Mencius, which says "those who respect and love others shall be respected and loved by others." When the Imperial Couple married in 1993, the press corps asked them, "How many children would you like to have?" Prince Naruhito replied, "As many as the stork wants to give us," but for many years the Prince and Princess were not blessed with child. The birth of Princess Aiko was truly a "gift from the stork" for which they had waited for a long time. The main streets of Tokyo were decorated with congratulatory banners, and celebrations were held all over the country, with lantern parades and other festivities. The birth of the princess was also seen as some good news for Japan, which has been so disheartened by the 10-year-long economic recession. There was much plausible-sounding talk about how, as if to share in the good fortune of Princess Aiko's birth, Japan would have a baby boom, and people would start to loosen their purse strings. It was hoped that, in this way, the princess's birth would benefit the economy by some ¥14 trillion. Unfortunately, however, several months later, those anticipated economic benefits have not eventuated, and Japan remains in recession. Nevertheless, because Princess Masako successfully gave birth for the first time at the relatively advanced age of 36 years, especially after overcoming a miscarriage several years ago, it is



Photo : Kyodo News

Princess Masako and her first child Toshinomiya Aiko

believed that the news has had a major impact on women in their 30s and 40s who are wondering whether or not to have children, and that it has given them encouragement.

In the background to how the news of Princess Aiko's birth has been discussed in so many different ways is an event that made the headlines of newspapers around the country two months later. A report released by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's (MHLW) National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS) gave some projections that backed up the vague concerns that people in Japan were already feeling, and it was reported as major news. The newspaper headlines shouted things like, "Japan's birth rate seriously plunges to 1.39," "Population will peak in 2006 before falling" and "The Japanese population will be cut by half in 100 years." Because Japan's birth rate is falling at such a sharp rate, peo-

ple all over Japan are beginning to feel anxious about whether or not it will be possible for Japan to maintain its current economic scale and favorable social security system of high levels of welfare and medical services. On the other hand, although the only option available to reverse this trend is for Japanese women to become positive once more about having children, it is becoming increasingly obvious that this will also be difficult to achieve. These facts were re-affirmed in the January report.

The report of the IPSS stated as follows.

"According to the latest National Census conducted in 2000, Japan's total population was 126.93 million. This number will continue to climb gradually until it reaches a peak of 127.74 million in 2006, after which it will fall, reaching the same level as the current population in 2013. In 2050, Japan's population will be 100.6 million."

The "Reference Projections" of Japan's population from 2051 to 2100 listed at the end of the report produced a chilling reaction in everyone who saw them. Japan's population will fall below 100 million in 2051, and by 2100, it will be 64.13 million. That is just half of today's population. The total fertility rate (TFR), which is the average number of children that each woman will bear in her lifetime, had already fallen well below 2.08, which is considered to be the rate needed to sustain a certain level of population, by the mid-1970s, and is currently as low as 1.36. When the IPSS released similar projections for Japan's future population five years ago, it predicted that, by 2050, the TFR would have recovered to 1.61. In the latest report, however, the IPSS predicted that it would be just 1.39 in 2050, which is little different from the current rate. This means that the IPSS itself has reached the conclu-

sion that it is highly unlikely that Japanese women will become positive once more about having children. How Japan's economy and social security system can be sustained with these kinds of figures is a question that is worrying ordinary people as well as the experts.

How has this happened? I asked a woman journalist in Tokyo. According to herself, the idea that giving birth to children and spending money on their education is an economic loss spread rapidly among Japanese women of the so-called "*shin-jinrui*" (literally, "new human race") generation, who were born from 1960 onwards. These women have a weaker motivation to have children and to spend money on children's education. The "*shin-jinrui*" generation, both male and female, grew up in a society made more affluent by Japan's period of rapid economic growth, and enjoyed the benefits of the bubble economy in their late 20s. Now, however, as they approach their 40s, they are in the midst of a protracted recession and their wages are not rising, the generation above them is being buffeted by the restructuring storm, and they do not know when they will be the next to face that sad fate. Fewer workplaces still offer the stability of the seniority system and lifetime employment, and there is no prospect that their own children will be able to enjoy the same affluence or live a stable life. This change in social conditions has led to a decrease in marriages, increases singles in marrying ages and child-bearing ages and to a rise in the number of couples who marry but decide not to have any children. All of these trends are ultimately leading to the sharp decline in Japan's birth rate. This kind of changing consciousness is also apparent in the public opinion surveys conducted by the Japanese government every five years. Between 1992 and 1997, the number of people who responded, "Even if I get married, I do not necessarily have to have children" rose by 12 points to 42.6%. Meanwhile, in response to the question "Ideally, how many children would you like to have?," the average response was 2.51 in 1992, but this had fallen to 2.40 in 1997.

Since the release of the IPSS report,

the problem of the declining birth rate has been covered extensively in the media, and the MHLW has formed a committee of experts to consider what kind of action to take in response to the problem. One of the most popular topics is comparisons with other industrialized countries, looking at what kind of social systems other countries are putting in place to make it easier for their citizens to give birth to and raise children. Norway, which has a birth rate of 1.84, has become the focus of much of this kind of attention. Five years ago, I had the opportunity to interview Gro Harlem Brundtland who was Norwegian Prime Minister for 10 years and who made Norway into a country where women have made greater advances in the workforce than in any other country. Brundtland said, "We were able to turn Norway's population around from a decline to an increase by introducing a number of different measures simultaneously. These included new leave arrangements that allowed both men and women to have equal responsibility for childbirth and parenting, home helper programs, building day-care centers, and a quota system to promote the advancement of women in the workforce." She also proudly said, "In my country, it is not unusual for government ministers to take maternity and parental leave."

In Japan as well, fathers have been able for several years now to take child-care leave, but in reality, very few men actually take advantage of this system. The fact is that one of the reasons given by many women for not having children is the lack of cooperation they would receive from their husbands or partners in caring for the children. In fact, in Japan, the problems facing working mothers are many and varied. Because there are not enough childcare centers, many mothers find that they cannot place their children in day-care even if they want to, and in many cases, even when they do find a place, the center's hours are restricted. One also often hears complaints that kindergartens and primary schools give far too little consideration to working mothers, to the extent that they could be accused of assuming that all mothers are full-time housewives. These kinds of systems require urgent solutions, but

the amount of government spending on children in Japan is only around 3% of total social security spending. This is extremely low compared to the 10% of other industrialized countries, and there is little hope of any improvements being made in this area. What is even more important is to reform the awareness of Japan's male population. From where I stand, having left the job of raising our children totally to my wife, when I look at today's young couples, the husbands cooperate a great deal in parenting and housework. If this can become more accepted as the norm in the workplace and these fathers can obtain greater cooperation from their workplace and colleagues, the situation in Japan may change, and it will no longer be known as the country where fathers spend less time with their children than any other country. If this happens, then perhaps more young people will feel the desire to have children and to raise them.

Gloria Steinem, who has been the leader of the women's liberation movement in the United States since the 1970s, made this comment to me three years ago. "Years ago, we used to say, 'Whatever men can do, women can do, too.' Now it's different. Today, the catchword is, 'Whatever women can do, men can do, too.'" She explained that the best relationship between the genders is for men and women to do the same work and occupy the same roles, in the home, in the community and in the workplace. Without this, she said, women will lose the desire to give birth and to raise children. Whenever I see people of my own generation putting their heads together to try and come up with ways of stopping Japan's population from falling, I remember these words of Steinem, and I feel like saying to them that there are other things than constructing more day-care centers, or offering financial incentives for a second or third child that we need to be thinking about. **UTJ**

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