

Family Policy in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive sense of crisis in Japan over the falling birth rate and aging society issues is generating an active public debate about gender, the family, the organization of the workplace and the policy approaches best able to cope with these problems. This article considers explanations for demographic change, then turns to current Japanese family policy, focusing on the contradiction between formal laws and policies which aim at supporting families and informal practices which make domestic responsibilities more burdensome. It attempts to provide insight into these policies by focusing on the policy process, identifying characteristic patterns and approaches, strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese political system.

Japan's moves to deal with unprecedented family policy issues are of interest to all those concerned about the demographic changes and political challenges confronting most industrialised countries in the late twentieth century. Japan's population is aging faster than any other country's and this, together with declining fertility, is forcing fewer workers to shoulder the burden of financing retirement pensions and social services for ballooning numbers of retirees. The pervasive sense of crisis over the falling birth rate and 'aging society' issues is generating an active public debate about gender, the family, the organisation of the workplace and the best policy approaches for coping with these problems. Understanding this debate is valuable for gaining insight into the low fertility and aging problems that many other countries likewise face as the 'baby boom' generation advances towards retirement age followed by the 'birth dearth' generation. Comparative studies of social and family policy rarely look at non-Western societies; Northern Europe (especially Scandinavia) and North America receive a disproportionate share of attention. Studying Japan can give us insights into how a major political

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and economic power, with distinctive traditions, social values, understandings of state–society relations and policy processes, goes about crafting family policies. Japan's approach to dealing with its looming demographic and political crises should interest social scientists, policy analysts and policy makers interested in understanding approaches to family policy among Asian late developers and the institutional competence and responsiveness of different countries' political arrangements.

This article proceeds as follows: first it considers explanations for demographic change, then turning to family policy, it examines formal laws and policies as well as the informal customs and practices which shape divisions of labour and resource development within families. The conclusion attempts to provide insight into these policies by focusing on the policy process, identifying characteristic patterns and approaches, strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese political system.

DEMOGRAPHIC TIME BOMB

Demographic change and family policy is hardly a new topic; Alva Myrdal more than fifty years ago analysed the reasons for declining fertility in Sweden and argued for social policies to ease the burden on families of raising children (Myrdal, 1941). Demographers, from Myrdal to the present, argue that the fundamental force driving the transition from high to low fertility is economic and social development. The transition from agricultural societies to highly industrialised, urbanised ones reduces the economic value of children, who instead of providing free labour for farming and security for their parents' old age, turn into expensive commodities, requiring years of support to complete the education they need to get good jobs. Although low fertility rates have been largely offset by low mortality rates, most advanced industrialised societies are facing radical shifts in the composition of their populations and overall population decline. Among these, the United States and Sweden have relatively high fertility rates (about 1.8), followed by England and France at about 1.7, then by Japan, Germany, Italy and Spain in the 1.5 and lower range, with Japan registering a new all-time low for 1995 of 1.43 (*Asahi*, 9 Nov. 1996; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1996a, p. 3).

Analysts of demographic change in Japan offer a variety of explanations for the falling fertility rate. Most point to the recent tendency to delay marriage; in 1990 the average age at marriage was 26.9 for women and 30.3 for men, surpassed only by Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Denmark (Retherford *et al.*, 1996). The Japanese are delaying marriage for a variety of reasons: young people enjoy a period of relative freedom from responsibility when they can play and be free of the

burdens of running a household; they want to save money for the start-up costs of married life, especially a down payment on a condominium or house. The opportunity costs of marriage for women are very high in an employment system that offers no good job opportunities to women who interrupt their careers to marry and raise children (Retherford *et al.*, 1996; Atoh, Oct. 1996). Apart from later marriage and a narrower window of opportunity for conceiving and giving birth to children, there is also evidence that child rearing has become a more onerous prospect. Many view contemporary urban Japan as a difficult environment in which to raise children. The poor infrastructure of public parks and green spaces means places to play freely and meet other children easily are limited, and many object to raising children while living in small, crowded apartments (Higuchi *et al.*, 1991). Secondly, as more women attempt to work throughout their adult lives, women increasingly experience stress over raising children single-handed. Because of the demands of their jobs, fathers are absent figures who do not help raise their children, which makes it especially difficult for women who continue to work while raising children, a trend which will worsen if the economy becomes more reliant on women's labour in the decades ahead. Thirdly, many dislike the burdens of raising children in a hyper-competitive environment, in which school entrance exams determine one's chances of success in life, and place great financial and psychological stresses on families (Retherford *et al.*, 1996; Higuchi *et al.*, 1991).

Many in Japan and elsewhere view the declining fertility rates and aging of their countries with alarm, warning that labour shortages and large numbers of old people in need of public support will reduce economic productivity and cause serious political problems in the years ahead (*Asahi*, 9 Nov. 1996). Predictions based on 'low' projections for population growth into the next century show Japan's population dropping from its present 125.6 million to the 60–70 million range, or even 50 million, by the year 2090 (*Asahi*, 9 Nov. 1996; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1996a). Many fear that drastic population decline will undermine Japan's position as a premier economic power. Projections of a population implosion have prompted responses ranging from condemnation of the present generation of young people for their 'selfishness' (Kominami, 1996) and exhortations to have more babies,¹ to attempts to educate the Japanese public and argue for policies which will make it easier to raise children.

In contrast, demographer Richard Easterlin argues that if one takes a long historical view, the level of support for dependent populations projected for the middle of the next century is not unprecedented – the size of

the elderly and young dependent populations combined will not exceed levels which many countries supported in the nineteenth century, so countries facing such demographic change should be able to remain economically productive and pay for the costs associated with caring for the elderly, especially if they can rely more on immigrant and female workers. Rather, the challenge will be a *political* one of shifting the burden for dependent care from private to public resources, as taxpayers assume larger burdens for elder care and parents spend less on child rearing (Easterlin, 1991).

It is not crucial here to determine which is right, Easterlin's or the more alarmist projections of the economic and political consequences of demographic change. Even taking Easterlin's analysis as correct, it is clear that Japan faces serious political and policy challenges if it is to remain a productive, prosperous society over the next several decades, and that the current family policy debate within Japan revolves around the low fertility and aging society problems. How is this shaping family policy in the latter half of the 1990s?

Policies to support child rearing

Although its family support policies place Japan near the less generous end of the spectrum among advanced industrialised countries, it is not nearly so reluctant a welfare state as the United States, which has little in the way of policy supporting families. Japan has universal public health coverage; offers modest payments to most families with children under the age of 3;² allows taxpayers to deduct a certain amount of their income for dependent spouses and children in figuring out their income taxes (Wennemo, 1992), and has an extensive network of publicly subsidised child care centres. In 1994, there were 22,532 daycare facilities serving 1,593,161 children, of whom 450,000 were under age 3. Roughly 11 per cent of children under the age of 3 and 32 per cent of 3 to 6 year olds were in daycare, with another 51 per cent of 3 to 6 year olds attending *yochien* (kindergarten). Local governments take primary responsibility for providing child care services; about 60 per cent of Japan's child care is public, 40 per cent private (Shimomura, 1990, pp. 25–26). Fees at public daycare centres are based on a sliding scale and vary according to family income and how much money the local government spends supporting them.³ Typically *hoikuen* (daycare centres) are open from about 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. weekdays, and half a day on Saturday; some have extended hours available for those who need to leave their children longer, up until as late as 10 p.m. In addition, there are 6,900 after-school daycare programmes for children in early elemen-

tary school grades during school vacations and for two or three hours in the afternoon after school.

In response to concerns about the falling fertility rate, the Ministry of Health and Welfare launched an emergency five-year plan in 1994 to improve daycare services, which was broadened in 1995 to a ten-year plan pursued in conjunction with the Labour, Construction, and Education Ministries and named the 'Angel Plan'. The Angel Plan aimed at an ambitious expansion by 1999 of existing centres and services, including a one-third increase in daycare places for infants; a three-fold increase (from 2,230 to 7,000) in the number of daycare centres providing extended hours; a seven-fold increase in centres offering temporary or drop-in care (aimed at non-working mothers); an expansion from 30 to 500 in the number of centres providing care for sick infants; a doubling of the number of after-school daycare centres; and an increase in the number of regional child rearing support centres from 236 to 3,000. These provide counselling and back-up for inexperienced parents, especially those living at a distance from other family members.

By late 1996, however, it appeared that the Angel Plan was foundering in its efforts to meet these ambitious goals, due largely to the inability or reluctance of local governments to come up with the required matching funds. The Ministry of Health and Welfare announced in October 1996 that it was reducing its planned expansion, in some cases by half, and unveiled a proposal to reform the child welfare law to be presented to the Diet in early 1997. Under this proposal, the MHW would encourage a private, market-oriented approach to daycare rather than (as it has in the past) fostering support for local governments' daycare services, in hopes of offering greater choice to consumers and circumventing cumbersome regulations (*Nikkei*, 29 Oct. 1996, p. 1).

Two new child-care leave laws took effect in 1992, one permitting either mothers or fathers to take up to a year's leave of absence following their baby's birth (though as in other countries almost no fathers take the leave), the other mandating that they be paid 25 per cent of their usual salary under the employment insurance system for the duration of the leave (Prime Minister's Office 1995, p. 25). Compliance by private sector employers with the parental leave laws is encouraged by government subsidies and 'administrative guidance'. (i.e., information pamphlets or lectures) but remains voluntary, with no legal recourse available to employees who are discouraged from taking leave or fired or refused pay because they take time off for pregnancy, childbirth or child rearing (Ministry of Labour, December 1996).

Policies and practices that rely on women's roles as caretakers

Family policies in Japan are not just about easing the burden of raising children. They also include strategies that rely on women in the private sphere of the family to provide valuable social services by investing in the human resource development of their children and husbands, caring for the old and accepting a secondary role in the economy. Thus an anomaly of Japanese family policy is the tension between recent and largely under supported policies that aim to encourage higher fertility rates by alleviating some of the burdens of child rearing, and long-standing policies and practices that reinforce traditional gendered divisions of labour and make women's domestic responsibilities more onerous.

The 'few children' crisis, though widely discussed, has not received the same level of attention or commitment of resources as the aging of Japanese society. For example, the 1997 national government budget proposes to spend three times as much on elder care as on child rearing (*Japan Times*, 21 Dec. 1996). Some even suggest that the attention and support directed at programmes to help the elderly make it difficult to provide the same level of support for programmes like the Angel Plan. Welfare policy towards the elderly has had a lengthy gestation period, first reaching the public agenda in the 1960s and slowly building support within the MHW, Ministry of Finance and among ruling Liberal Democratic Party leaders and businessmen. Initially the government moved to establish a European-style welfare state in the 1970s, but scaled back those goals in the 1980s into building a 'Japanese welfare society', a phrase which emphasises the approach of families taking responsibility for caring for the elderly at home, rather than relying on institutionalised care (Campbell, 1992; Osawa, 1994). As with child rearing support policies, some elder care programmes struggle for adequate funding. The government announced its 'Gold Plan' in 1989 'to promote home care for the elderly by expanding social services such as home helpers and respite care facilities', but according to anthropologist Margaret Lock, has been reluctant to raise taxes in order to finance the programme adequately (Lock, 1993, pp. 59, 49).

The move to define care of the elderly as a private rather than a government responsibility has generated dissent, as evidenced in the sharp declines in the percentage of those who view filial support of elderly parents as a 'good custom or natural duty' in recent replies to the biannual *Mainichi Shimbun* National Survey on Family Planning (Ogawa and Retherford, 1993, p. 595), and also in feminist arguments that 'the welfare system should be radically modified so that the "hidden assets" (*fukumi shisan*) it draws on, namely free nursing services carried out

almost exclusively by women in their homes' are recognised and the bulk of the burden transferred to society. 'Nursing the elderly at home . . . should not be based on the "sacrifice and devotion" of women' (Lock, 1993, pp. 52–4).

Yet despite evidence of shifting beliefs about the duty to care for elderly parents, Lock believes that most middle-aged women continue to feel a sense of obligation to care for elderly parents or parents-in-law. Few of them disagree with the view that the work of caring for the elderly should be the responsibility of close female relatives, and instead of feeling oppressed by their extended family situations, many take pride in their accomplishments on the domestic front. 'Rather than endure the punishing routines associated with white-collar work in Japan, many middle-class women actively embrace and reinforce the ideology of their worth as a "homebody", particularly so because care of the family is publicly recognized as a crucial and valued activity' (Lock, 1993, pp. 72–3). Lock continues,

for women who are at present middle-aged . . . the ideology in which women are designated by nature as nurturers, their lives given over in service to the family, is still very effective . . . [and is] usually understood as 'natural' and inevitable. . . . The combination of gendered socialization techniques in early life, reinforcement and hardening of these differences while at school, a powerful public rhetoric about correct womanly behavior, the positive value placed on endurance and self-control, widespread economic dependence, and . . . [the] social 'atomism' and relative isolation in adult life

ensures their acceptance of the social position in which they find themselves (Lock, 1993, pp. 76, 75). Gender ideologies shape men's sense of obligation as well, as they willingly accept their role as full-time workers who are 'on call' for the company, putting in overtime and committing much time to work-related socialising. Although some question the extreme role bifurcation between men and women and suggest that it would be good for all if the trade-offs were less extreme between the demands of full-time career tracks and the ability to take care of the home, raise children and have a life outside of the workplace (Suzuki, 1995; Omori, 1993), the complementarity of men's and women's work is still widely accepted, as is the respect accorded the endeavours of working hard for the company and raising bright, well-cared-for children. Even with emerging evidence of role conflict, most Japanese women and men live their lives within these gendered patterns.

Indeed, enlisting and reinforcing informal values and practices, particularly gender roles and the behaviours they reinforce, is a pervasive strategy in Japan with regard to family policy – one which is easily overlooked since it looks like the absence of policy. But one can scarcely hope to

understand Japan's family policies unless one looks beyond formal laws and regulations to the practices and norms which shape education, workplace, and domestic roles and expectations. Mary Brinton (1993) has argued that the structure of education and jobs encourages women to invest in the 'human capital' of their sons and husbands rather than developing their own educational or career-oriented potential. Jobs with large, prestigious companies are coveted in Japan because they ensure lifetime employment with steady promotions pegged to seniority. Admission to a prestigious university is the guaranteed route to such a job. The limited number of places at elite universities has given rise to a hyper-competitive examination system, which leads large numbers of Japanese young people to study obsessively and to attend *juku* (cram schools) as they prepare for their high school and college entrance exams. Three times as many young men as women go on to attend four-year universities (35 per cent vs. 12 per cent), despite the fact that more girls than boys graduate from high school (Brinton, 1993, p. 200). Brinton argues that it is reasonable for parents to decide to invest less in educating their daughters than their sons, since well-educated women are disadvantaged in the marriage market and may even be disadvantaged in the workplace (p. 210).

Women's participation in the labour market is characterised by an M-shaped curve, indicating high levels of participation right after completing school, a pronounced dip for the 30–40-year-old cohort, and high levels of participation again for the 40–54 age group (Brinton, 1993, p. 29). The curve reflects the norm that women marry about the age of 25, 'retire' from their first job, and have their first babies before they are 30. It suggests a much tighter spread of 'appropriate' ages for key life transitions in Japan than in other countries, and it holds despite shifts towards later marriage and fewer births described earlier.

Because it is assumed that young women will marry and drop out of the labour force while their children are small, young women are hired for fundamentally different kinds of work than are young men. Women's jobs do not require a great deal of training, nor do they entail transfers or job rotation (Brinton, 1993, pp. 160–7). Since employers do not invest much in training, women workers do not gain significant skills on the job, and do not become more valuable to their employers over time. The implicit understanding at many companies is that women leave their jobs sometime in their mid-twenties so that a new crop of 'fresh faces' can take their places, and the company will not have to pay larger seniority-based salaries to workers who have not become more valuable or productive (Carney and O'Kelly, 1990, pp. 137–8). When women return to the

workforce in their early 40s, the jobs they do are very different from the full-time, well-paid jobs that men of their age do. Typically women work part time at jobs that are within a short commute from their houses, often at small or family-owned companies, or do piecework. They are not paid well, do not receive the same benefits as male employees and are often given much smaller mid-year and year-end bonuses than men (Carney and O'Kelly, 1990, p. 134). They can be fired during economic downturns and hired in greater numbers when the economy is booming, giving companies the flexibility they need to maintain jobs for costly lifetime employees. Neither are women expected to work long hours of overtime or to accept transfers to other cities. Most middle-aged women workers accept the trade-off between low pay and insecurity in return for the flexibility to meet domestic responsibilities, which continue to be their primary source of self-definition.

Personnel practices which perpetuate women's secondary role in the workplace are supported by various government policies. For example, the tax system encourages married women to work part time by placing a cap on how much a married woman can earn before she must pay taxes on her earnings, stops being carried on her husband's insurance policy and her husband loses the tax deduction for his wife as well as his spousal allowance from his employer (Ōmori, 1993, p. 87), a basket of financial incentives that makes it rational for many women not to work or only to work part time. At present wives may not earn more than ¥1,410,000 (about \$12,000) per year without losing these benefits. Although an economic advisory council in the prime minister's office recently recommended doing away with this spousal benefit system in order to encourage more women to work full time (*Nikkei*, 22 Nov. 1996), it is a popular benefit and will be difficult to eliminate. The pension system also works to the advantage of full-time housewives, who receive survivors' benefits without ever having contributed to the National Pension fund. This has led working women to argue that it is unfair that they must contribute to pensions for homemakers, even though they usually receive no more in pension funds after their husbands die than women who have never worked (Kimura, 1996, pp. 57–8).

Many see potential for the Equal Employment Opportunity Law passed in 1985 to redress gender discrimination in the Japanese workplace. However, the EEOL, like the parental leave law discussed earlier, relies solely on administrative guidance to '*encourage . . . employers to refrain from discrimination on the basis of sex in all stages of the employment process, including recruitment, hiring, training, compensation and promotion policies, and retirement*' (Brinton, 1993, p. 229, *her emphasis*).

In response to widespread criticisms of the toothlessness of the EEOL, the Women's and Young Workers' Problems Council within the Labour Ministry has recommended revising the EEOL to permit the labour minister to make public the names of companies which fail to rectify discrimination against women, but whether the Diet will pass such a bill, or whether merely publicising corporate violations of the anti-discrimination law will have any impact, remains to be seen (*Japan Times*, 18 Dec. 1996).

Laws and mores relating to divorce also illustrate how informal practices and customs intertwine with laws governing tax deductions, property settlements and maintenance payments to reinforce the two-parent, male breadwinner family. June Axinn has observed that 'one of the most striking differences between Japan and other developed countries is the apparent stability of Japanese marriages and the intergenerational unity of Japanese families. The divorce rate, which stood at 1.02 per thousand in 1947, rose to a peak of 1.51 per thousand in 1983. In 1986 it dropped back again to 1.37 – the lowest of any of the developed nations', a comparison which also holds for the 1993 divorce rate of 1.52. This extraordinarily low divorce rate reflects the fact that divorce is considered shameful for both men and women; men who divorce are looked at as 'poor managers and therefore poor promotion prospects'. Most divorces (91 per cent) are arrived at through mutual consent, a small percentage through arbitration and only 1 per cent through judicial or family court decree (Axinn, 1990, p. 101).

Proponents of a reform that would permit separation to be a ground for judicial divorce – in essence, a 'no fault' divorce law – argue that a marriage that has irretrievably broken down cannot be maintained by law, but critics argue that 'the spouse not at fault will be put into a disadvantageous position if divorce is to be allowed by a simple separation without any guarantee of maintenance payments or without the resolution of custody issues' (Matsushima, 1993–4, p. 420). Such concerns reflect the dire economic consequences of divorce for most women: Few women receive any money or property at all upon divorce, and 55 per cent must support their children on their own incomes alone, working at the poorly paid jobs available to women (Axinn, 1990, p. 101).

The last aspect of Japanese family policy I consider here are laws affecting reproductive choice. Japan is striking, from a comparative perspective, because it bans use of oral contraceptives for non-medical purposes, yet it has an extremely permissive abortion law and high abortion rate. Taking the two policies in turn, the restriction on the use of oral contraceptives means that women cannot have them prescribed for contraceptive pur-

poses, but only for such medical purposes as regulating their menstrual periods. The Pill is viewed with suspicion by most Japanese women, who fear its side effects and risks. However it is also clear that policy makers support continued restrictions on the use of oral contraceptives in part because of pronatalist concerns (Jitsukawa and Djerassi, 1994; Higuchi *et al.*, 1991, pp. 16–18).

Abortion is regulated under the Eugenic Protection Law (*yuu sei ho go hō*), originally passed in 1948. The law makes abortion a criminal offence, but provides a variety of exceptions under which women can receive legal abortions, including a clause that allows abortion for 'economic reasons'. Though there have been numerous attempts by pro-life groups to eliminate the economic hardship clause, none have succeeded. Some restrictions have been passed, however. In 1989 the Ministry of Health and Welfare pushed through a revision to the law that decreased the term for legal abortions from 23 to 21 weeks, over strenuous objections by women's groups. At the same time, language regarding handicap or foetal deformity as a reason for permitting abortion was added, provoking strenuous objections from a coalition of women's and handicapped rights groups. In 1996 the Diet again revised the law, this time eliminating the handicap reason for permitting abortion and changing the name of the law to the Botai Hogo Hō, or 'Law for Protection for Mothers' Bodies'. Feminists have angrily attacked this latest revision because the new title of the law refers to 'women' as 'mothers', thus reinforcing the ideological representation of women as (potential) mothers. They also expressed anger and betrayal because of the way the handicapped rights groups abandoned the effort to pass a strong law protecting women's right to reproductive choice once it was agreed that the language regarding foetal deformity would be removed. Because of the high level of concern about Japan's low fertility rate among powerful political and bureaucratic leaders, feminists worry that pro-life groups, especially *Seichō no ie*, will eventually succeed in their efforts to limit access to abortion (Jitsukawa, 1996).

Making sense of Japanese family policy

Contradictions between easing and exacerbating family burdens: formal and informal policies

Japanese family policy is a mosaic of conflicting priorities and initiatives. Formal policies that help working parents deal with work–family conflicts, redistribute the costs of raising children or mandate equal treatment in the workplace are often offset by 'family policies' found in the

interstices of gender socialisation and in institutions and practices that assume and reinforce traditional gender roles. The practice of women working for low-pay entry-level jobs in their twenties, and returning and working for low-pay part-time jobs in middle age, works because women see being a wife and mother as their primary role. They willingly accept jobs that allow them to interrupt their careers and work part time so that they can raise children and take care of the house. Some question whether women really *choose* this career track, given that the messages about women's central role as nurturers are so overwhelming and unquestioned (Carney and O'Kelly, 1990), but perhaps that is the point. Japan's gender ideology continues to shape family arrangements even more powerfully than government policies that permit parental leave or subsidise child care centres. Of course there are signs of strain, most evident in Japan's extremely low completed fertility rate, which some current family policies attempt to relieve. Yet it would be misleading to focus only on the strains, and overlook the great resilience and legitimacy of gendered roles and divisions of labour. The fact that gendered patterns are all still largely accepted explains why Japanese family policy can rely on private, familial, solutions and arrangements, and also why it is so difficult for Japan to recognise and resolve the strains that are dissuading many young women from taking up the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood.

Position taking

It is striking that many of the laws surveyed above – the Angel Plan, the Gold Plan, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, the parental leave laws – share a tendency toward 'position-taking'. Either they set ambitious goals but fail to provide adequate funding or support (Angel, Gold), or they outlaw discrimination against women or pregnant workers, but offer no enforcement mechanisms to deter violations, which are in fact rampant (EEOA, parental leave). How can we account for this pattern?

Inchoate policies with a large degree of administrative discretion have several advantages: they leave it to the bureaucracy to decide how and whether to enforce laws or make exceptions; they avoid litigious, individualistic enforcement strategies; and they respond to domestic and international pressure with an apparent commitment to ending discrimination against women without actually requiring businesses to change their employment practices.⁴ Less cynically, programmes like the Angel and Gold Plans, with ambitious but unmet goals due to underfunding, may indicate that top bureaucrats are ahead of popular opinion on such issues as aging and the low birth rate. That is, bureaucrats may be

quicker to understand the urgency of family support policies than the local governments that must provide funding to make the programmes work.

Top-down policy process

In order to understand why such policy responses are common, one needs to understand the policy process itself. In contrast to models that picture informed and active interest groups as the major source of policy change, the primary source of policy innovation in Japan is bureaucrats – intelligent, highly trained professionals familiar with policies developed in other countries and responsive to what they understand to be the emergent problems that require attention.⁵ Bureaucrats decide which problems to address by relying on opinion surveys, demographic and economic forecasts, and other technocratic information. Direct contact with the intended beneficiaries of family policies (such as elderly people, working women or mothers) appears to be limited to attempts to ensure a modicum of representation on *shingikai*, or advisory groups. Yet this is not true for all policy areas, or all interested parties. For an argument about abortion as an issue area where interest groups have been influential, see Norgren, 1996. One might also note the evident ease with which a nursing home contractor exchanged lavish bribes to Ministry of Health and Welfare bureaucrats in the early 1990s for government contracts to build nursing homes in Saitama prefecture, suggesting that big money interests at least can influence policy.

The advantages of a top-down approach controlled by experts are consistency, rationality and the ability to learn from the successes and mistakes of other countries. The weaknesses are arrogance and inattention to problems which the bureaucrats do not perceive as serious or remediable via government action. To take an example, while working mothers report male-centred job norms and strained ‘human relations’ (*ningen kankei*) (‘an oblique reference to subtle pressures, snubs, put-downs, and the like that make a worker’s day-to-day life a misery’) as a serious problem preventing them from claiming the parental leaves and consideration they need to work while pregnant or raising children, bureaucrats regard such issues as beyond the scope of what policy can accomplish (*Asahi*, 9 Nov. 1996; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 21 Nov. 1996). Such a problem is particularly serious in Japan, where workers who complain of work–family conflicts have long been regarded as selfish whiners, unwilling or unable to put the company and the job first as their colleagues do (Roberts, 1994). Translating issues housed in the privacy of the family and home into legitimate public problems amenable to political remedy is never easy, but it seems an especially daunting task in Japan.

The dominant form of political interaction in a bureaucrat-centred policy process is inter-ministry and interagency rivalry for limited resources of attention and political and financial support. Bureaucrats develop and promote policies relevant to their areas of expertise; different ministries and agencies are pursuing many different policies at the same time. In such a climate, the reputation of a ministry or agency is key for gaining the political support necessary to pass laws, to ensure that they are adequately funded and to guarantee nominal compliance with the ministry's directives and mandates, especially when laws typically rely on the suasive power of the enforcing ministry to give effect to 'administrative guidance'. The late 1990s is likely to be a difficult time for programmes sponsored by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, because of recent scandals that have rocked the Ministry over careless treatment by a MHW official over the issue of HIV-tainted blood products in the mid-1980s, and bribery involving former Vice-Minister Okamitsu (the top career bureaucrat in the MHW) and several others.

Japanese political system

Though obviously one must understand the bureaucrat-led policy process if one wants to understand Japanese family policy, there are other reasons, also rooted in the Japanese political system, for the current tensions between policies that support families and those that add to women's caretaking responsibilities. First, Japan's political leaders are not interested in developing an interventionist, expensive welfare state along the lines of Sweden, which is often mentioned with a verbal crossing of fingers as if to ward off evil. The dominant thrust of family support policy is the 'Japanese welfare society', which makes care-giving for old and young primarily a private responsibility with some government back-up. Neither leaders nor citizens accept the vision of state responsibility for public welfare that prevails in Northern Europe. If anything, leaders seem interested in emulating the United State's reliance on private, market-based solutions to providing daycare and the like.

Secondly, Ryutaro Hashimoto's Liberal Democratic Party controls the government after the November 1996 lower house elections, but not with complete security, since the LDP did not win a majority of the vote. Many of the issues crowding the public agenda in Japan today have to do with controlling the size of government, both in terms of spending and reining in powerful bureaucracies. Keeping a lid on government spending, bringing the Japanese government's large deficit under control, and especially 'administrative reform', which Hashimoto said in late 1996 he was 'on fire' to pursue, are at cross purposes with programmes that

require more intervention and spending, like the Angel Plan. Furthermore, as noted earlier, to the extent that elder care policies have become a public priority, they may detract from the political and financial support available for other kinds of family support policies.

Thirdly, *the* fundamental value Japan has pursued in the postwar period has been economic growth, to the neglect of developing social infrastructure such as parks, green spaces, roads, commodious homes and leisure. That tension appears to be playing itself out again with respect to family support policies. The key political players – the coalition between big economic interests (the Keidanren) and the LDP – are reluctant supporters of spending for old age and family support programmes, wanting to shift as much of the burden as possible to families and to avoid a large-scale welfare state approach. This lack of enthusiasm may stem from the nature of Japan's version of democratic corporatism, which excludes organised labour from the on-going conversation about the broader consequences of policy (Pempel and Tsunekawa, 1979; Wilensky and Turner, 1987). Without labour, there is no one to articulate the connections between policies to support families ('especially by easing the contradictions between women's roles as mothers and as full-time workers') and Japan's long-term national interests, especially the goal of ensuring Japan's continued economic power. And indeed, even if organised labour *were* part of this conversation, it is not clear that it would make this case adequately, since unions exclude most women workers from membership and have been reluctant to recognise women's issues (Roberts, 1994).

Furthermore, the corporatist governing coalition has ambivalent feelings about policy changes that could disrupt the traditional Japanese-style family. Gender roles and informal policies that exclude women from life-time employment and reinforce the satisfactions of being a housewife and mother have broader social utility. A mother who devotes herself primarily to developing the potential of her children fosters the economic productivity of the nation by producing disciplined, well-educated workers. Such roles also make women available as a reserve army of low paid, easy to fire or hire workers that allows the economy to be more adaptable to economic up and downturns. Demographic change is calling these roles and arrangements into question, as falling fertility and looming labour shortages push the government to pass policies that make it easier for women to work while raising children. But the business-LDP ruling coalition is reluctant to foster fundamental change in child rearing patterns, and thus is lukewarm in its support for policies that might encourage women to be lifelong full-time employees rather than following the two-phased career track most women follow at present.

CONCLUSION

In closing, let us consider for a moment where Japanese family policy may be heading. In my view, the most likely scenario is that Japanese family policy will continue to send mixed messages, via laws that attempt to relieve the strain on families by improving day care and parental leave but which are undermined by laws and practices that assume and support women's availability to provide care-taking in the private, familial sector, and via its preference for mere 'position taking', i.e., passing progressive family support policies but not providing adequate financial support or enforcement mechanisms to ensure effective implementation. Japan's approach to family policy is somewhat implicit and inchoate, motivated both by reluctance to spend much on the social infrastructure and willingness to rely on and reinforce deeply ingrained cultural values about marriage, women's obligations to care for their children and elderly parents, role complementarity and the value of self-sacrifice for the good of the whole. Thus a likely trajectory is that Japan will continue to pursue a policy of reinforcing stable conjugal and stem families and doing little to alleviate role stress for working mothers.

But it also seems possible that Japan will decide that it is important to encourage women to have babies *and* work in responsible, life-long jobs, especially as the population ages and the number of men available to work in demanding full-time jobs dwindles. What will be needed then are serious family support policies that will make child rearing and elder care less onerous. These might include a generously funded 'Angel Plan', a paid parental leave law with teeth, career tracks that permit sane schedules and do away with mandatory transfers for both women and men, and increased funding for respite care and day and residential facilities for the aged. They also might include ways to alleviate the currently obsessive concern over exam preparation and admission to top universities, perhaps by making more space for students to matriculate at the public universities.

How Japan wrestles with the demographic and social policy problems it faces has much to teach other countries with declining fertility rates and aging populations. Because of the severity of these problems in Japan, it will have to move promptly to address such problems as elder care, inter-generational pension fund equity, encouraging women to participate in responsible, life-long workplace employment and keeping the birthrate from collapsing. Whether it chooses to do so by continuing to count on women as private caregivers for young and old and avoiding large public outlays for social services, or by improving government-provided supports for families that will encourage gender equity and permit individuals greater choice remains to be seen.⁶

NOTES

1. A notable example is a speech by then Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu given before the Diet in 1990 in which he said, 'The declining birthrate raises many questions about our country's future. With an eye on tomorrow, we must strive to increase the desire of our young to have children' (reported in Arioka, 1991, p. 51).
2. Children's allowances are means tested, but the eligibility point is set high enough to include most of the population with two or more young children. The *Kosei Hakusho* (Ministry of Health and Welfare White Paper) for 1995 indicates government payments to families with at least one child age 3 or younger of ¥5,000 per month per child for the first and second children, and ¥10,000 per month for third and subsequent children, with an income ceiling of ¥3,589 million (about \$35,000) for a family of four. (Thus, a family with three children would receive ¥20,000, or about \$200, a month.) For families that make more than that, the employer is required to pay 70 per cent of the children's allowance for incomes up to ¥6.25 million, with the national government paying 20 per cent and local 10 per cent.
3. At the time of writing, Tokyo, which has the lowest fertility rate in the country, is reportedly doubling the fee charged for city daycare centres beginning April 1997, in order to help cover the high cost of *hoikuen* in rural parts of the country. Thus a family with one infant under the age of 3 will pay ¥70,000 a month instead of ¥35,000. Sugimura Shino, Japan Women's University, 20 December 1996.
4. This is true at least of the EEOL, passed in response to Japan's decision to sign the 1985 UN 'decade for women' resolution. To this researcher, the pattern seems more broadly valid as well. For example, the glossy English language brochure published by the Prime Minister's Office, *Japanese Women Today*, states that 'women's policy made considerable progress during the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-85), with gender equality achieved in nearly all legislation and systems' (Sōrifu, 1995). Such an embarrassingly misleading statement seems to indicate the Japanese government's willingness to 'package' the letter of the law for maximum impact on international opinion.
5. Note that career bureaucrat jobs with national government are considered the plum jobs for the graduates of Japan's elite universities, which have already selected the best and brightest in the rigorous 'examination hell' process described earlier.
6. I would like to thank the Center for Women's Studies at Tokyo Woman's Christian University for supporting this research in the fall of 1996.

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