

United Nations

Division for the Advancement of Women

Expert Group Meeting on “Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men,
including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS”

United Nations Office at Geneva

6-9 October, 2008

Sharing of Housework and Childcare in Contemporary Japan

Masako Ishii-Kuntz *

Division for the Advancement of Women
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

United Nations, New York

Fax: (212) 963-3463

daw@un.org

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw>

* *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.*

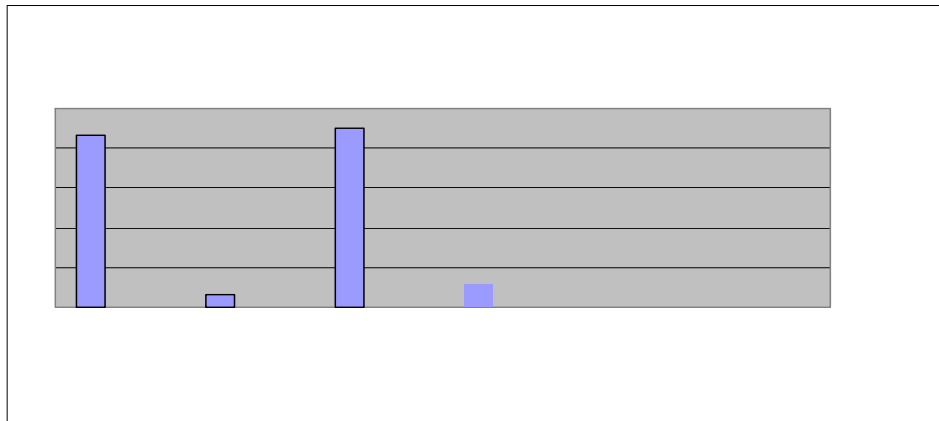
1. Background and Overview

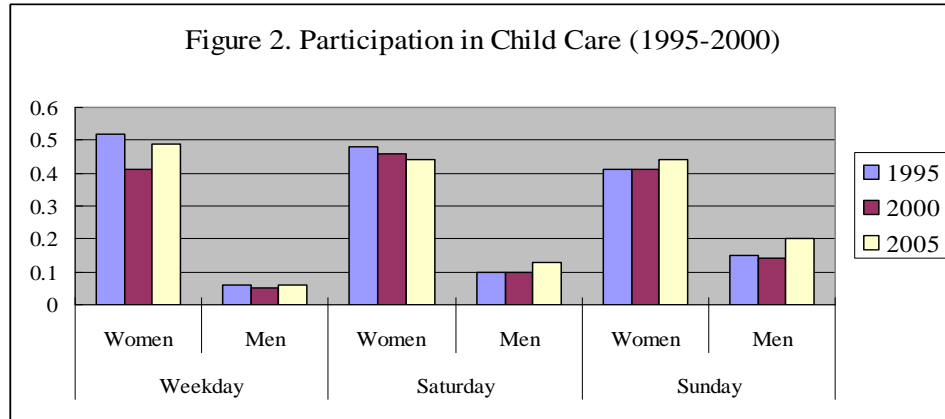
A typical image of Japanese families is that of a traditional one with strict gendered division of housework and childcare between husbands and wives. Although this is still the case in many contemporary Japanese families, there are several reasons why they are

and concrete recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners, and educators in terms of how they can help eliminate gendered nature of sharing housework and care work in the near future.

2. Gendered Differences and Inequalities in Housework and Care Work

According to the nationwide survey conducted by NHK (2005, Nippon Broadcasting Association), there remains a sharp division between women and men in terms of their participation in housework and childcare. As shown in Figure 1, although there is a slight increase in men's participation in housework between 1995 and 2005, women spend considerably more time (daily average of 4.26 hours) in doing housework compared to men (1.38 hours) in 2005.

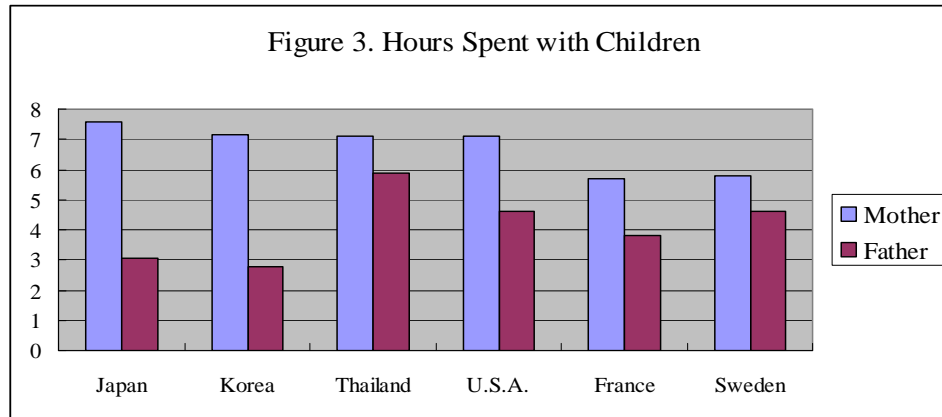




Source: NHK (2005) Japanese Time Use in 2005.

As the fastest aging society in the world, Japanese government has taken numerous

(28.3%), France (20.4%), and Sweden (29.6%). It is also important to note that these figures include such non-interactive hours as watching TV with children.



Source: National Women's Education Center, International Comparative Survey on Family Life Education (2004-2005)

Several studies also report that the types of childcare activities that Japanese women and men engage in differ considerably (Ishii-Kuntz, 2003). For example, it was found that Japanese men who spend time with their children are most likely to engage in “fun” activities such as taking a walk or eating (not preparing) meals with their children, compared with their wives who are more likely to do most of the mundane physical care of their children.

Within the last decade, Japanese fathers' limited involvement in child rearing has been a topic of several investigations (see, Ishii-K

childcare increases the level of couples' communication and marital satisfaction (Suemori, 1999).

In summary, the level of Japanese fathers' participation in housework and childcare has changed little over the last 15 years, and it remains lower compared to other countries. However, when Japanese fathers are involved in child caring activities, we know that it has a positive consequence on children and couples' psychological well-being.

4. “Family-Friendly” Laws and Policies

With the concern over the sharp decline in the birthrate, the Japanese government has been introducing various “family-friendly” policies and laws since the early 1990s. As shown in Table 1, these policies are classified into four main categories of “work-related,” “childcare programs,” “community childcare support,” “health insurance,” and “financial support.”

Table 1: Family-Friendly Policies in Japan

Work-related	Maternity Leave, Child Care Leave, Shortened Work-Hours, Mother’s Hello Work, Mother’s Salon
Childcare programs	Day Care Centers, After-School Children’s Clubs
Community childcare support	Short-Stay, Twilight Program, Family Support Center, Kindergarten, After-School Children’s Class, Children’s Center
Health insurance	Mother-Child Health Book, Health Check-Ups for Expectant Mothers and Infants,
Financial support	Childbirth Allowance, Childbirth and Childcare One-Time Allowance, Child Support

In the following section, I will review some policies and laws that are particularly relevant for women and men assuming equal responsibilities at home.

- (1) **Law Concerning the Welfare of Workers Who Take Care of Children or Other Family Members, Including Childcare and Family Care Leave** (Childcare and Family Care Leave): Enacted in 1992, this law, for the first time, allowed Japanese fathers to take child and family care leave from work. According to this law, employees are able to take child care leave until the child is 12 months old (18 months in exceptional cases such as not being able to find a childcare center, or if the designated child-caring parent is

deceased, injured, or became ill), and family care leave for 93 days while receiving the guaranteed 30% of the monthly salary from the Employment Insurance. Gendered gap appears with the most current figures of 72.3% of mothers and only 0.5% of fathers taking this leave. Further, class-based inequalities were noted since this law initially prohibited men who work for smaller-sized firms from taking childcare leave.

- (2) **Limitation of Work Hours (including Flex Time) and Night Work:** According to this law, employees who have preschool children are allowed to limit their overtime work up to 24 hours a month, and can avoid working in midnight shifts from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. Employees who have children under 12 months but not taking childcare leave can be granted flexible work-hour arrangement (Flex Time), and are allowed to shorten their

5. Recommendations for Policy-Makers, Practitioners and Educators

In order to bring about equal responsibilities between women and men in childcare and household labour, it is necessary to change both structures and attitudes (Ishii-Kuntz et al., 2004). According to Matsuda (2006), we need to change men's working patterns and habits to achieve gender equality at home. Others emphasize the importance of changing women's work style (Yashiro, 2008) as well as public

- (2) Promoting gender equality in governments, companies, and other groups by offering “gender-sensitivity” workshops, and publicizing and rewarding those who attend such seminars and actively practice gender equality in their organizations.
- (3) Creating opportunities for new parents to learn equal sharing of domestic responsibilities through seminars and Father-Infant Book. Teaching the importance of unpaid work through family life education courses.
- (4) Correcting gender-biased education systems through teacher training, creating gender-sensitive contents of counseling and guidance, and offering courses on gender equality to students in elementary and secondary schools.
- (5) Promoting gender equality at the community level by appointing female leaders in the community and neighborhood associations, offering courses for men on gender equality, and creating a section in the public libraries with books and magazines on gender equality.
- (6) Evaluating and researching how gender equality is practiced in day care centers, schools, communities and companies, setting up an Opinion Box on gender equality in public places, offering lectures on pension systems, introducing persons in the community who practice gender equality in various ways, and creating opportunities to build supportive networks to exchange ideas on gender-equality.

Media portrayal of women and men

- (1) Creating policies that provide guidelines on gender-equal portrayal of women and men on TV, newspapers, magazines, movies, and other media.
- (2) Setting up watchdog groups against the biased portrayal of women and men’s roles in the media.
- (3) Increasing employment and promotional opportunities for women in the media.

Key References

- Ishii-Kuntz, M. (1996). A perspective on changes in men's work and fatherhood in Japan. *Asian Cultural Studies*, 22(1): 91-107.
- Ishii-Kuntz, M. (2003). Balancing fatherhood and work: Emergence of diverse masculinities in contemporary Japan. in J. Roberson and N. Suzuki (Eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Japan*. Routridge. Pp. 198-216.
- Ishii-Kuntz, M., Makino, K., Kato, K., & M. Tsuchiya. (2004). Japanese fathers of preschoolers and their involvement in child care." *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 66(3), 779-791.