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## *\*Serial\** *Home Economics Education in Japan 9*

This serial focuses on the characteristics and current issues surrounding home economics education in Japan, while also providing a historical perspective.

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# Home Economics Education for Societies Securing Work-Life Balance (WLB)

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## Keywords

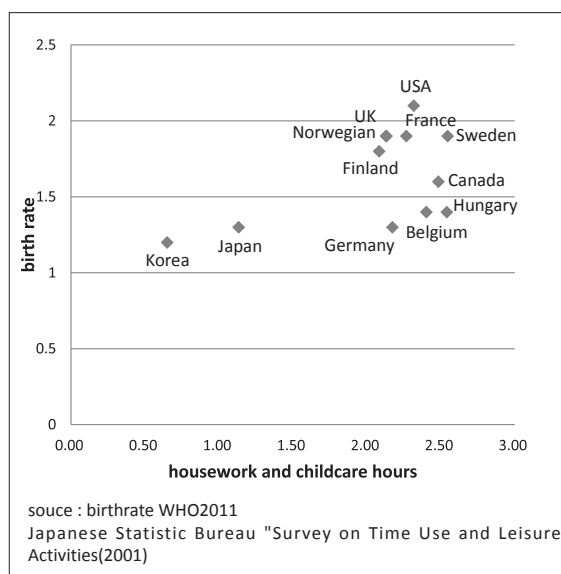
work-life balance, birthrate, housework / childcaring hours, worksharing

## 1. Work-life balance (WLB) as a countermeasure to the falling birthrate

In countries all over the world, gender-equality is being promoted; there is a growing awareness of the problems associated with long working hours, and as the birthrate declines, the proportion of elderly people in the population increases. This is particularly serious in Japan, which has the second-lowest total fertility rate out of nine OECD countries with low birth rates (Japan, Korea, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden, Great Britain, and America).<sup>1</sup>

Countermeasures to the falling birthrate carried out thus far in Japan include policies known as the Angel Plan (1994) and the New Angel Plan (1999), improvements to the childcare leave system, and job-placement assistance for women who have left their jobs to raise children. Furthermore, since 1999 the government of Japan has publicly commended business practices that consider the needs of women who are raising children, such as improving nurseries in the workplace and making working hours more flexible. However, based on the fact that the total fertility rate

Figure 1: Male housework and childcare hours and birth rate



in Japan has remained low, one may surmise that these policies have not necessarily to the rising birthrate.

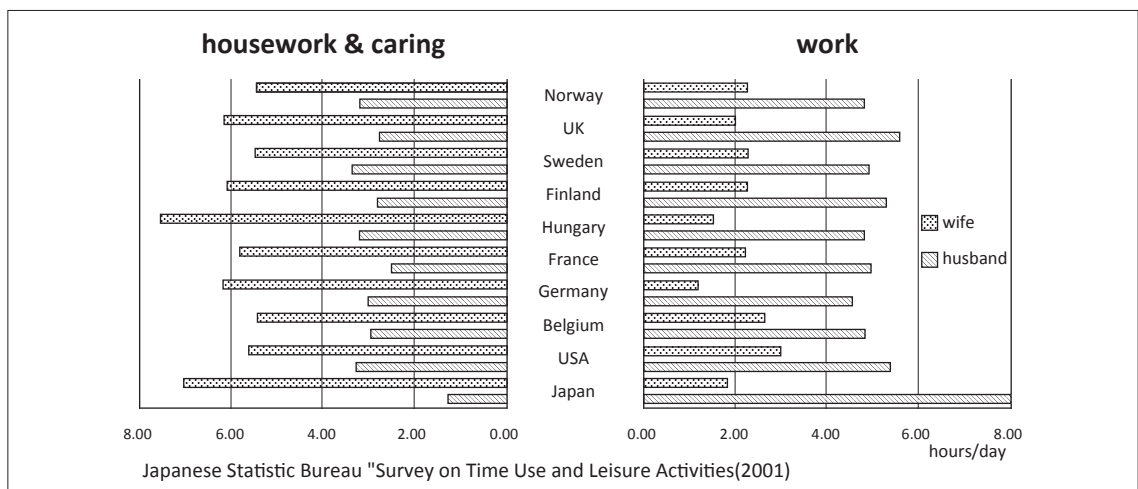
However, recent attention has been paid to the relationship between labor and the falling birth rate, as research has shown that areas with higher female employment actually have higher birth rates. Even where the female labor force participation rate is high, total fertility rates do not fall. Conversely, there is a trend toward higher birth rates in countries where women are working.

As shown in the figure1, the more time on average that men spend on housework/childrearing, the higher the fertility rate.

What can be done to increase the amount of time that men spend on housework and childrearing?

Japan is known around the world for its long working hours, and “karoshi,” death from total exhaustion due to working long hours, has become an internationally recognized Japanese word. In Japan, men spend a greater proportion of their time in the workplace than do men in any other country, when compared proportionally against time spent on household chores. Conversely, men in Japan spend very little time on household chores. Japanese women spend about the same amount of time at work as women in other countries, but they spend more time on household chores. That is to say, because Japanese men have extremely long working hours, they have almost no share of the housework, and housework is carried out by women, who spend more time on it. One can say that it is difficult for women to participate in the labor force because their responsibility for housework is increased by men’s poor balance between working hours (work) and housework (life).

Figure 2: Comparison of time spent by husband and wife on housework/childrearing and work with under 6 years children.



Against the backdrop of such a situation, the “work-life balance charter” and “guidelines for the promotion of work-life balance” were formulated in 2007 at Japan’s “government and peoples’ senior meeting” with the aim of promoting working practices that allow men to also participate in child rearing.

Work-life balance(WLB) means reducing the hours spent at the workplace in order to increase not just the time spent on childrearing and housework, but also sleeping hours and leisure time.

That is to say, the hours gained from a reduction in working hours are not just used for increasing the hours spent on childrearing and housework, but also spent on leisure and relaxation by people who are unmarried or have no need to raise children, in accordance with their individual lifestyle and value system. In contrast to previous countermeasures to the falling birthrate, which targeted women based on assumptions about the traditional division of labor by gender role with policies supporting housework and childcare, WLB policies benefit not just workers who are raising children, but also a broader diversity among workers, including the young, elderly and single, by restraining work hours, improving leisure hours, and guaranteeing healthy and cultured living.

## **2. WLB as an answer to Japan's agenda to reduce long working hours and promote gender equality**

Japan ranks as low as 101st out of 135 countries in the gender gap index, which measures the degree of gender equality<sup>2</sup> and, counting “cerebrovascular disease and ischemic heart disease” and “psychological disorders due to mental burdens” as *karoshi* (death from overwork), there were at least 113 and 65 incidents, respectively, in 2010, so the problem of *karoshi* has not been resolved.

In the Cabinet Office's guidelines for WLB, the following three items are presented as important terms and conditions for societies that have achieved WLB:

1. Societies where economic independence through employment is possible
2. Societies where one is able to work enough hours for a healthy and wealthy life
3. Societies where one can choose from a variety of working patterns and lifestyles

A number of policies are published in the guidelines beyond support for childcare, such as supporting employment for young people and single mothers, transitioning from irregular to regular employment, adhering to laws related to working hours, promoting the regulation of long working hours and the acquisition of vacation time, and establishing systems of flexible working patterns.

## **3. Work sharing to effectively implement WLB**

The main point in implementing WLB is the shortening of working hours. That is to say, much of the work of implementing WLB is about taking initiatives to control working hours.

As a countermeasure to the falling birthrate in France, although the government has generously provided financial support to companies, such as assistance with the cost of company daycare and salary subsidies for parental leave, this has become a large financial burden on the state. In Sweden, WLB is implemented with laws such as those for childcare leave, equal opportunity between genders, and those against discrimination, and the impact of these laws is monitored by an ombudsman system. In USA, although this has not been taken up at a federal level, awareness has been increasing thanks to research arguing for the importance of “changing means of employment” in order to facilitate WLB.<sup>3</sup>

The Netherlands, where a work sharing system has been established, is widely recognized as a country that has had success achieving WLB. During a major recession due to an oil crisis in the 1980s, in order to reduce the dramatically increased number of unemployed persons, regulations regarding working hours were amended to promote work sharing whereby two people are employed to work four hours each instead of hiring one person to work eight hours. As a result, WLB was achieved by a reduction in the amount of working hours allotted per person, and the number of unemployed

persons was reduced. An equal-pay-for-equal-work system ensures that the hours worked by full-time and part-time employees are valued equally, and this may be key to the success of the work sharing system.

One problem facing Japan is that there is a large disparity in the hourly wages of part-time and full-time workers, such that a worker on 2/3 of the hours of a full-time employee could earn only 1/2 of the pay. Accordingly, many workers do not want to become part-time employees. In the Netherlands, there is no difference in the hourly wages between part-time and full-time employees, and accordingly WLB is thought to have been achieved, with a promotion of work sharing arrangements and an increase in part-time workers. The lack of a disparity in pay between full-time and part-time workers is a key driver of WLB.

#### **4. Developing work-life balance studies**

In the 2003 changes to the curriculum guidelines, “responses to the decreasing birth rate, aging population and the promotion of gender equality” were brought into the remit of home economics, and also the 2011 basic policies for improving the curriculum guidelines established that there would be a “response to the current condition whereby the birth rate is decreasing, the population is aging, and families are not properly fulfilling their purpose.” To that end, in the high school curriculum students are expected to “have an understanding of issues such as contemporary issues and conditions regarding taking on housework and employment, and the significance and features of each of these; and furthermore, to consider issues such as how one’s working conditions greatly affect one’s home life, and what is needed in order to enjoy harmony between one’s career and one’s life (work-life balance)” (2011 revised commentary on “home integration”).

Lessons addressing this have been developed under home economics. These encompass the following:

1. Childcare
2. Significance and features of housework
3. Living expenses required for a healthy and wealthy life
4. Importance of working to secure an income (wages)
5. Realities that affect one’s working conditions
6. The significance of compensated and uncompensated work, and how one allocates time to each
7. Sharing the burden of work that has been divided according to gender role
8. Building equality in personal relationships and family relationships

In short, by bringing together the study of all the above, home economics is expected to promote citizens who can realize WLB.

#### **References**

- 1 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2010) ‘Statistics regarding births’
- 2 World Economic Forum (2012), ‘gender gap index’
- 3 Labor Policy and Training (2011), ‘Material series 84 support measures in order to bring about work-life balance with corporate voluntary initiatives’