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What has Changed in Japan? Case Studies of Women’s Life Paths from the Last Two Decades

“Japanese society is changing” – this is a sentence that we can often hear from diverse sources in recent years. It is also said that this change mostly concerns the family and within it, women’s traditional role. Although we know that change has been always part of the society, family and women’s role in the society have been affected by radical change in a lesser degree compared to other societal institutions in Japan. While this can be partly true, it has to be underlined that the Japanese family has indeed undergone two major transformations in the last one and half century due to the modernization processes promoted by the Meiji Restoration after 1868. In the 21st century it seems that Japanese society is facing another major transformation. Some of its signs can be already observed, however, most of the effects are to be shown only in the upcoming years and decades. In this paper we are presenting three case studies of women’s life paths in nowadays Japan that allow us to see how far this transformation has proceeded so far and what can be said about the future direction of this change. Before presenting the case studies and their analysis, a brief overview of the changes in women’s position during the last one and half century will be provided.

Major changes in women’s social position between 1868 and 1945

From a legal point of view, the law that majorly affected women’s position in the Japanese society in the 19th century was the Meiji Civil Code issued in 1898 (Minpō 民法). It remained in effect until 1947 when it was replaced by the new family law. The Meiji Civil Code regulated the family model and single members’ position within it. The Code defined that the society’s smallest unit

shall be the *ie* 家 based on hierarchical relationships among its members.¹ The Meiji Civil Code basically overtook the patriarchal *ie* household model typical to the samurai society of the Tokugawa period, but it also greatly drew on the family registration system, the *koseki seido* introduced by the Meiji government as one of the instruments to control the population.² While back in the Tokugawa period the model functioned as a custom, now it became the law and as such, it presented a number of legal obligations. The Meiji Civil Code ordered the application of the *ie* model to the entire society and established it as the only legal form of family system. In this system the male head received all authority over its members, wife and children included, and property rights and inheritance system became based on this authority. The law served also as a means to control reform initiatives, among them feminist movements. The Meiji family law had its opponents already at that time and critics pointed out that it was not following the needs of the modern society which progressed towards to the diffusion of the nuclear family model.³

Indeed, the family as such was not merely the passive observer of the political decisions in the Meiji-Taisho period. The family soon became one of the platforms where societal change started and proceeded. Women often took the lead in these processes.⁴ One of the signs of the modernization at this time was the emergence of the middle class and accompanying life style, in particular in the urban areas. The family became the central focus of the realization of the middle class lifestyle and in its creation women as wives and mothers had an important role.⁵ With the spread of the official ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母 (“good wife, wise mother”) women’s role was increasingly imagined within the private sphere of the family passing the responsibility of childrearing and household work entirely to women – while men became the “public face” of the family and its breadwinner.⁶ The ideology of “good wife, wise mother” was in effect until the end of the war, however, its influence continued to be felt long

¹ Here it is important to note that the English translation of *ie* as “family” is not always exact and covering the actual sense of the Japanese word. The Western “family” and the Japanese *ie* concept of family system is not overlapping in every sense. The Japanese *ie* system is a much broader concept compared to the Western concept of family and therefore its translation is often problematic. The translation needs to be placed into textual context and depending on context, translations such as “house”, “clan”, “dynasty”, “extended family” may be more feasible (Hendry 2019).

² Nobuyoshi 1994: 67.

³ Nobuyoshi and Searight 1994: 68.

⁴ White 1996: 209.

⁵ Ambaras 1998, Papp 2015 and 2014.

⁶ Papp 2016.

after the war and even today thinking about family and labor division between male and female division still bears an imprint from this ideology.⁷ Nonetheless its widespread use, the validity of this ideology was questioned already in the early twentieth century. Women's participation in the labour market was essential in several sectors of the early industrialization of Japan. Such an example is the textile industry where the majority of workers were young women. Also, the *ie* model proved not to be feasible for the big number of young people who migrated from the countryside into urban centers in search of work and opportunities. Indeed, in towns and cities the number of nuclear families started to grow long before the new 1947 Constitution would have abolished the *ie* system.⁸

How did the Japanese family changed in the postwar decades? In his study from 1994, the sociologist Nobuyoshi describes the Japanese modern family at that time as: "[...] family as the basic unit [...], with the husband as the provider of social labor, and the wife and children supporting this role."⁹ Here we can see that the division of gender roles and labour is not significantly differing from the Meiji-Taisho ideology. The gender based division becomes visible also in the rate of labour participation of women which continued to decline in the postwar decades until its lowest point in 1975.¹⁰ Nobuyoshi concludes that the postwar Japanese family law, even if it formally stipulated equality, clearly failed to resolve the gender inequality in Japan.¹¹ While labour participation of Japanese women began to slowly rise after 1975, gender equality has been hardly achieved and roles in the family are still based on tradition and custom. The following three case studies illustrate this situation.

Case study 1

Mariko has worked in the media sector for 30 years.¹² At the age of 40, she had her first (and only) child and took a one-year-leave from work. When the child

⁷ Uno 1993.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the nuclearization process see Kato 2013. It has to be noted that the traditional family system continues to exist in changed forms in present-day society, too. This is true in particular for families where significant property and its inheritance are at stake, or where a traditional craft and art is to be continued in the family (Hendry 1981, 1986, Kato 2013).

⁹ Nobuyoshi and Searight 1994: 76.

¹⁰ From 54.5 percent in 1960 it has fallen to 45,7 percent in 1975 (Nobuyoshi and Searight 1994: 77).

¹¹ Nobuyoshi and Searight 1994:78.

¹² Personal names throughout the case studies are all phantasy names.

turned one, she found a nursery and returned to work. Even though her employment conditions were fairly favourable, she was able to return home from work only one and half hour earlier than her co-workers. She had no free time and managing everyday life became strenuous. After a period of fatigue, she had the impression that in neither of the two realms, family and work, she was doing well. Moreover, her husband, too, had a demanding work and the major part of housework has been entirely left to her. In the fifth grade of elementary school, in order to secure an acceptance of the child into a good middle and then, high school, the parents decided to send their child to *juku*. *Juku* is an afternoon school institution type that is very common in Japan. Families send their children in these schools to study extra hours to improve their academic achievement. *Juku* attendance also meant that the load of work on the mother increased; she had to accompany the child to *juku* and then at home her help with the homework was needed, too. Exactly at this time her company decided to start an early retirement system that offered relatively favourable conditions.¹³ After a long consideration, she decided to take the opportunity and retire. Now, she has sufficient time to help her child and take care of the household and family. As the child is approaching the entrance exam period, her support and help is even more important.

Analysis

In Japan, there is no real part-time employment contract. Part-time in Japan does not mean a substantial decrease of work time, it basically refers to unfavourable conditions regarding payment, taxation and benefits. Moreover, the switch between employers is seen in negative light by the society, therefore women's return to the job market after childbirth and/or after the childrearing period, is often difficult. Once having left the workplace, there is little chance to return to it after a few years with the same conditions.¹⁴ There exist no unpaid leave, either, and the system leaves little tolerance for switching between active and passive periods or between different workplaces.

Also, many companies take advantage from distinguishing between *seikikoyō* 正規雇用 and *hiseikikoyō* 非正規雇用 employment mode. *Seikikoyō* com-

¹³ Early retirement system in Japan offers the possibility to retire earlier than the retirement age. Before this system has been introduced, early retirement was possible only on very unfavourable conditions. Today, not all but many big companies offer this possibility in order to enhance a swifter exchange of employees.

¹⁴ As a common practice, Japanese companies accept new employees at the same time of the year, typically selecting from the fresh university and high school graduates.

monly means a full-time regular employment with an open-ended employment, whereas *hiseikikoyō* is a non-regular employment. Non-regular employment contracts have for example part-time workers, dispatch workers or the so called *arubaito* workers. Companies can apply different conditions, though, in terms of benefits career opportunities and wage there is a huge difference between regular workers and non-regular workers. For women, in particular, it is extremely hard to work in the *seiki* system as it is loaded with obligations such as job mobility and long working hours. Consequently, women, especially once married and with children, usually accept employments in the non-regular mode while most men are employed in the *seiki*, regular system. In 2012 women comprised of 70 percent of all non-regular workers.¹⁵

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment) has been accepted in 1985 as a sign to promote equality in employment relations.¹⁶ The EEOL made it possible for the first time for women to be employed in a career employment mode, the so called *sōgōshoku* 総合職, to which earlier women had no access. Before this, the only careerpath open to women was *ippanshoku* (non-career track) which is mostly offered to women to cover administrative tasks in the office without the possibility to progress higher. *Sōgōshoku* enables the employee to progress to higher managerial positions. Nevertheless, in spite of the EEOL, there has been no drastic change in the employment practices of Japanese companies. Due to severe conditions of employment, even today many women quit their jobs after marriage and childbirth. Most women would wish to return to labormarket once the most difficult period of childrearing is over, however, the employment opportunities and in particular, employment modes open to them are very restricted. This is worsened by the lack of childcare facilities and the minimal participation of husbands in household work. As a result, many Japanese mothers give up regular employment for good.¹⁷

¹⁵ Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2013. In recent years, however, there is a steady increase in the rate of non-regular work in Japan among all active population due to the prolonged period of economic recession.

¹⁶ The law has brought about some improvement as it is shown in recent White Papers on Gender Equality (White Paper | 内閣府男女共同参画局 (gender.go.jp) last visited 20/07/2021

¹⁷ Although the number of full-time housewives is decreasing, in 2014 there were approximately 7.2 million *senyō shufu* in Japan (Statistics from the Japanese Institute for Labour Policy and Training: <http://www.jil.go.jp/kokunai/statistics/qa/a07-1.html>).

Case study 2

Nanase lives with her family in her husband's homeland in Hokuriku (Japan sea). The husband's family has been owning and managing a traditional inn there for long. By marrying her husband, Nanase also married his family and their enterprise. One day, she knows, that she will take over her mother-in-law's tasks around the house and in the inn. In traditional Japanese inns the responsibilities of the owners' wife (called *okami* in this case) are great, she is the one representing the face and the soul of the inn and is supervising the employees, as well. Nanase therefore needs to learn everything from her mother-in-law and to show respect to her in every sense. She has to give her full support in all work and in the course of the years she learned to appreciate this work and not only, she also learned to like it. She is determined to take care of her relationship to her mother-in-law as well as to the other employees of the inn. She finds full satisfaction in this work and in the chosen path.

Analysis

Nanami's life is a success story even if it needs to be noted that she did not have much choice in it. Once she decided to marry her husband and his family she was more or less aware of the responsibilities she will have to take on. As it is the case with other similar traditional institutions, in family enterprises, often handed over by several generations, the continuity of tradition and family customs are factors on which the economic success is based, and family happiness depend on. Complying with the traditional ways is the condition to secure the continuity of the family and its economic activity. However, as for matters concerning childrearing, it has to be also underlined that within this system the load of childrearing on the mother is less heavy than in the case of wives of salaried men employed in big companies. Nanami has two children and during the years her parents-in-law and other family members gave substantial help with the children. Because of this, for example, her children did not need to attend nursery. The condition of this successful co-existence, however, is personal sacrifice and compliance to existing customs.

Case study 3

Yui is an only child and she was working at an insurance company when her mother got ill. For a while her father was able to take care of his wife but soon he got tired. So, Yui, at age of 33, was forced to quit her job, leave Tokyo and return to her native town in the region of Kansai. As it is the case, women at her age do not have much employment opportunities and those existing mostly fell under the category of non-regular employment. For Yui it was not possible to take an 8 hours-work because of her mother's needs and therefore, she took on short-term contracts and part-time contracts. These cover shop assistant jobs and simple office clerk works. In these conditions she slowly reached her 50s without being able to think about her own life, marriage and children.

Analysis

Japan has started to elaborate its social welfare system rather late leaving the bulk of responsibilities on the family, and within it on women. The care for elderly parents was left to their adult children, mostly on wives and daughters-in-law. With the longest life expectancy in the world and dropping fertility rate makes Japan one of the most rapidly ageing society in the world.¹⁸ Policies for the elderly has been changed several times in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to the rapidly changing demographic situation. The care for elderly parents is still mainly falling on families that find it always more difficult to fulfil this task. In 1989 a policy focusing on community-base and in-home services for the needy elderly was established.¹⁹ The Gold Plan of 1989, modified again in 1994, was a 10-year plan with the aim to promote health care and welfare for the frail elderly and give community-based assistance to families for home-care. However, as Usui and Palley conclude, "These policies are designed to use families and communities as building blocks of Japanese services to the elderly."²⁰ However, Yui could take use of these services only when her mother reached 65 years of age. The services, though, have several limitations and also in the case of Yui, not all her needs are met. There are still many women in Japan who have to leave their work because of the necessity to take care of elderly parents or parents-in-law.

¹⁸ See the recent annual report on Annual Report on the Ageing Society [Summary] FY2020 (cao.go.jp) (accessed: 20.07.2021).

¹⁹ Usui and Palley 1997: 364.

²⁰ Usui and Palley 1997: 376.

Conclusion

In the recent three decades, many things have changed in Japan. Rapid and drastic demographic changes exercise a strong pressure on the society and on the traditional ways of thinking about family and women's role. The marriage as the only socially acceptable lifepath is not any more widely applicable and the society is more ready to tolerate alternative life choices. Women decide to get marry at a later age, the number of divorces is slowly rising and single life style is seen as acceptable, too.

Nonetheless, task division within the family is still based on traditional customs. The majority of women still comply with this way of thinking and gives up career or simply, jobs when their help at home is needed. This is typical first of all to middle class with husbands able to financially support the family and home staying housewife.²¹ Good education provided to offspring is still seen as a must in middle-class lifestyle and in order to achieve this, mothers' work is important and necessary apart from the financial means. Career possibilities for women are further rendered difficult by the work conditions in companies where long working hours are expected from employees with regular contract. This not only means that women are not able to keep these hours along their other duties in the family, but it also means that husbands' participation in family life and housework is kept on minimal. It can be said that this structure based on wives' work in the family and husbands' full dedication to work has become a condition for industrial growth in Japan during the twentieth century and it is very difficult to change it.

Gender equality is still an aim hard to reach in Japan. Results of statistics demonstrating progress in gender equality attract public attention every year. In the most recent Global Gender Gap Report 2020 Japan has arrived as last in the list of developed countries.²² The participation of women in politics is low, too Japan results as the 144th country in the world remaining behind compared to several Asian countries. The number of women deputies is extremely low and sociologists suggest to introduce obligatory quotas for women in the parliament. However public opinion seems not to back up this kind of initiatives.

In sum, while still many women have little choice whether to be a full-time housewife or a working mother and wife, the pressure of the society seems to have being decreased in the recent years. Women's equality in education has been more or less achieved. Women marry later nowadays and therefore, can follow a career before marriage and childbirth for longer. All this can be seen as

²¹ Vogel 1996: 178–180.

²² World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2020. In a total comparison, Japan is on the 121st place among 153 countries.

an indicator of a start for a positive change for women and generally, of a change in gender roles and employment modes in Japanese society.

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