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Exit, voice, and family policy in Japan: limited changes despite broad recognition of the declining fertility problem

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Summary Japanese policymakers have been troubled by the ‘declining fertility problem’ for two decades, ever since a sharp drop in births raised public awareness of the issue in 1990. This article explores why it took a full decade before government officials diagnosed the problem and called for a shift toward gender-egalitarian labour market policies in order to reverse the fertility decline. It also asks why the prescribed changes have yet to be adopted, despite continued hand-wringing over fertility rates. Both delays, it argues, stem from the ability of Japanese women – who began entering the workforce in an era when they had already gained full control of their fertility – to ‘exit’ from the work–family reconciliation challenge by postponing or opting out of motherhood. This deprived the reform movement of the ‘voice’ needed to transform male breadwinner structures that are rooted not only in public policies, but also in private sector practices.

Keywords family policy, Japan, women, fertility, gender

Recent Japanese elections, including the election in the summer of 2009, have seen all of Japan’s political parties publicize plans for ‘addressing the declining fertility problem’ (*shōshika taisaku*). The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), for example, listed its plan to sharply increase child allowances as the second of five policy priorities in its 2009 election manifesto, vowing that it would ‘make this a country where one can raise a child with the support of society as a whole’ (DPJ, 2009: 13). Not to be outdone, the incumbent Liberal Democratic Party proposed to pay families US\$3,500 upon the birth of a child and vowed to provide a range of additional subsidies to reduce the cost of child-rearing.

In some respects, these proposals are impressive. The DPJ, upon its victory, immediately began planning to offer child allowances of US\$276 a month for every child under 15 – at an estimated cost of 5.5 trillion yen a year (1 per cent of GDP) once it is phased in (DPJ, 2009: 6). It is also striking to anyone

who followed the policy debate when Japan first began discussing the ‘declining fertility problem’ in 1990 how openly politicians are looking to the *state* to solve this problem. Back then, feminists objected to characterizations of the trend as a ‘problem’ because they saw women opting out of marriage and motherhood as a sign of progress. Japanese bureaucrats similarly hesitated to identify increasing the birth rate as a goal, worried that this might cause some to label them as dangerous pronatalists. In contrast, in recent years one can hear women’s movement leaders speak without hesitation about declining fertility as a ‘problem’, and politicians speak loudly over campaign sound-trucks about how they are committed to doing everything possible to boost the nation’s fertility rate.

While the debate has certainly evolved in these respects, 20 years after the nation began talking about these issues, *policy has changed only modestly*: childcare services have been expanded only

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slightly and the new childcare leave programme has not increased at all the proportion of new mothers who remain attached to employment. Even the DPJ's cash allowances for families do little to spur the development of expanded childcare services and leave benefits that might help more women achieve work–family balance.

There is, however, an even greater disappointment. A decade ago, between 1997 and 2000, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) published a series of reports that argued that the fertility decline was in large part a product of Japan's lifetime employment system and gender norms, which combine to impose huge opportunity costs on women who choose to marry and have children. The norm that women are responsible for virtually all work in the home, combined with employer expectations that workers in career jobs devote their lives to the company, made it difficult for women to stay in such positions after having children. Yet the employment system made it virtually impossible to move back into these jobs after taking time off for child-rearing. Together, these structures guaranteed that Japanese women pay a tremendous price for their decisions to have children.

The MHW went further than merely diagnosing the problem in this way. It also pointed toward a quite radical solution by citing data from the OECD which showed that the nations with higher fertility rates had relatively gender-egalitarian employment systems, with high rates of women working and women's salaries closer to male levels. The Nordic countries were at the high end of that regression line, with relatively high levels of gender equality and high fertility rates. Japan was at the low end of both measures. The data was quite suggestive: to move toward higher fertility rates, Japan needed to restructure its employment system and gender norms to make them more similar to these European models.¹

Strikingly, however, policy in this area has barely changed at all. There were some efforts to help new mothers stay attached to work by encouraging firms to offer flexitime, but the provisions were entirely voluntary and have done nothing to boost the proportion of mothers in the workforce. Instead of taking these reforms to the logical next step – dismantling a lifetime employment system that is a poor fit with the extra demands women and men have on their time when they have children – Japan has reverted to bribery: US\$276 a month for your child. While

the new policy offers families US\$50,000 over the life of each child, this sum remains far short of the actual costs a woman bears when she leaves a career job to care full time for her family or settles for low-wage part-time work. Moreover, the extra money for families will do nothing to offset the losses to the woman's own earning-power, which means women with children will continue to be heavily dependent on their husbands.

This article seeks to explain why family policy change in Japan has not been more far-reaching, despite the hand-wringing about falling fertility rates. I argue that Japanese women were slow to find their voice because of what I call the 'exit dynamics' of their situations. Women who had exited from work to become full-time housewives had no personal incentive to campaign for labour market reforms that would do them little good because they had given up work many years earlier. Neither did women who had opted out of motherhood in order to devote themselves to careers have an incentive to modify the rules after it was too late for them to go back and start a family. Instead of a vibrant women's movement to push forward the agenda articulated by the MHW, Japan got a 'silent revolution' in which women mostly accommodated the forced choice of the system and exited either motherhood or careers.

The article is organized as follows. Section 1 lays out the logic of my 'exit dynamics' explanation by drawing out the implications of Albert Hirschman's exit-voice framework for an area of politics that has not previously been viewed through this lens: women's movements and family policy. Section 2 describes what Japanese family policy was like before it came under scrutiny in the 1990s and examines how the choices available to women shaped the 'exit dynamics' of the issues area. Section 3 then examines how Japan's policy response was hampered by the absence of a vigorous exit-driven or voice-driven reform drive.

Exit dynamics and family policy

All industrialized nations, including European nations that now have progressive family policies, once had male-breadwinner systems that assumed most women would take care of the children while relying on their husbands' work and social benefits. Most of these systems were challenged by women and government

policymakers several decades ago as women started entering employment. Women coping with the challenges of working while caring for children agitated for help from the state, employers and their husbands. At the same time, government officials saw that employers could only bring women into the workforce if the state provided more social services to support working mothers and began expanding these programmes (Gelb, 1989; Morgan, 2006).

Not all nations, however, have seen women enter the workforce at the same pace or at the same time. While the Nordic countries and France saw women move into the workforce in large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, Japan did not see a significant surge until the 1990s.² This difference in timing, I argue, helps explain why family policy in late-to-gender-role-change Japan has not evolved in the same way that it did in nations that saw women enter the workforce in large numbers two decades earlier. What happened in the interim is that women gained full control of their fertility by securing liberal access to birth control and abortion services, allowing them to postpone and more easily opt out of motherhood. Women also secured normative changes that are more approving of sex outside of marriage and delayed marriage, which again allow women more freedom to delay or opt out of motherhood as well. The result of these developments is a very different set of 'exit dynamics' in late-to-gender-role-change nations like Japan that has important implications for the politics surrounding family policy.

Japan's distinctiveness is highlighted by a comparison of the demographic context in which Swedish women began entering the workforce in large numbers in the 1960s. At that time, Swedish women still tended to start their families at a young age. Swedish women in 1960 entered their peak child-bearing years in their early 20s. By 29, the average woman had 1.46 children. By 34, she had 1.9. This meant that when Swedish firms began looking to women to fill their growing labour force demands in the 1960s and when Swedish women began looking for paid work, most of the women who could go into the workforce already had children at home. These women had no 'exit option', no way of opting out of having children, if they wanted to work.³

In contrast, by the time Japanese women started entering the workforce in large numbers in the 1990s, they already had secured the birth control

and abortion rights, and normative changes governing sex and marriage, that led to delayed fertility and the ability to delay it further. In 2000, the average Japanese woman of age 29 had just 0.72 children, and the average woman of 34 had 1.18 (NIPSSR, 2002). This meant that when Japanese firms sought to hire women to fill labour force needs, there was a large cohort of childless women they could recruit, without having to do anything to change employment practices to accommodate mothers with children. Even more importantly, when these women sought to go into the workforce, they were able to enter child-free and work just like men in jobs designed for 'salarymen'. And if they wanted to *stay* in these jobs, they had the ability to delay or opt out of motherhood (or 'exit') in order to accommodate rules that made it difficult for mothers to stay in or return to career jobs.

In order to understand the implication of this difference in exit dynamics, I propose, we need to draw on the framework developed by Hirschman in his 1970 book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. By 'exit' he meant uncoordinated, individual action such as removing one's children from a state school out of frustration with the quality of schooling or buying a Volvo rather than a General Motors vehicle out of concern that GM cars are not safe enough. The ability to 'opt out of motherhood', I propose, is analogous to these kinds of market choices. Such decisions are made by women one at a time, and are generally not coordinated in any way. Hirschman contrasted 'exit' with the alternative of 'voice', by which he meant a political process such as organizing a petition to force a principal to fire an incompetent teacher or joining a non-governmental organization to pressure auto firms to build safer vehicles. Clearly, the decisions of women to join women's groups, or work through their unions for new childcare leave benefits, or demand that their husbands do more housework are examples of the exercise of 'voice'.

Hirschman pointed out that both of these mechanisms hold the potential to force organizations to improve their performance but that neither can be assumed to work efficiently under all conditions. Here I focus on two observations that promise to shed light on how family policy responds to varying combinations of exit and voice driven by women's unhappiness with the status quo.

First, he argued, organizations tend to be structured to respond primarily to one mechanism or the other, blunting their responsiveness when customers, members, or citizens react to frustrations by choosing the *other* response mechanism. Thus GM, for example, is structured to respond primarily to the choices consumers make in the marketplace, but it tends to be deaf to complaints from non-profit organizations. In contrast, state schools are designed to respond to the demands of citizens who elect officials and form pressure groups. While this makes them responsive to these constituencies, it leaves them disinterested when parents take their children out of the state school system. School officials may even welcome the quieter life they can lead when noisy complainers move their kids into private schools.

Second, Hirschman identified the tendency of exit and voice to be related to each other in 'hydraulic' fashion: 'deterioration generates the pressure of discontent, which will be channelled into voice or exit; the more pressure escapes through exit, the less is available to foment voice' (Hirschman, 1993: 176). What this means is that when parents who are frustrated with the quality of their school system respond by moving their children into private school, this tends to make them less involved in groups calling on the schools to try harder. Since state schools have traditionally been structured to respond more to this political process than to enrolment trends, this hydraulic effect of exit on voice has a deleterious effect on the ability of the school system to recognize what is going wrong and respond. In the worst cases, the quality of education may simply spiral downward.

Hirschman's logic suggests that the key variable affecting the quality of a state's response to exit trends is the *cost of exit* relative to the costs of exercising voice. Systems with low costs of exit (like consumer markets) develop organizations that are attuned to the 'exit' mechanism and respond effectively to that. Systems with high costs of exit (like states) develop structures that are tuned into the exercise of 'voice'. The problem, Hirschman's framework suggests, arises in cases like school systems where exit is possible but is *moderately costly*. The price of private school is within reach of many families but is not so cheap as to enable mass defections when the quality of education first begins to fall.

I propose that much of politics, including the process through which nations learn that social structures

organized around male breadwinners are frustrating young women who aspire to have rewarding careers while also raising their children, present the same challenges as running a school system. Most of the decision-makers who preside over the tax and benefit rules, employment regulations and practices, and norms about who does the housework are tuned in to 'voice' and are not in the habit of monitoring 'exit' behaviour. Those with the power to change these structures will only learn that action is needed and will only learn *what* they need to do when loud voices tell them they are upset and want specific changes, or when exit behaviour (emigration, declining fertility, labour shortages) reaches such proportions that they are compelled to figure out what's wrong and make the required changes.

Hirschman's framework leads us to expect the following relationship between exit costs in this area and reform outcomes. *When exit costs are high*, when women who already have children have to work for financial or psychological reasons and when they therefore have no easy way to get out of having to care for children or work, they will be driven to use voice in ways that increase the probability of voice-driven reform. They will form a social movement or use existing political organizations to fight for expanded childcare services, after-school care for children, labour market rules that allow them to reenter the workforce after leaving to care for children, equal opportunity work rules that prevent discrimination against mothers, and social change that convinces male partners to do more of the housework. *When exit costs are very low*, when women can easily emigrate to nations with more progressive gender policies, marry liberated foreign men, divorce husbands who don't do their share of the housework, or opt out of marriage and motherhood entirely with little social pressure, the decline in the number of women available for motherhood and matrimony will be so abrupt that even distracted bureaucrats and politicians will begin to pay attention, figure out what is wrong, and make an effort to remedy the situation.

On the other hand, neither an exit- nor voice-driven response is likely *when the costs of exit are moderate*, when large numbers of women desiring both to work and have a family can postpone or give up on one or the other of these goals because they haven't yet made the irreversible decision to have

children, but when the psychological or financial costs of this choice causes them to make these decisions after much delay and self-examination. Under these circumstances, some of the women will eventually give up on motherhood and others will give up careers. But the numbers making these choices will be small enough, and the trends will emerge so slowly, that neither the fall in fertility rates nor the tightness of the labour market will motivate social change. Meanwhile, both the stay-at-home mothers who have given up their careers and the women who have decided not to have children will have lost the incentive they once had to fight for changes in the social structure.

Family policy and exit dynamics in Japan

In order to assess how far Japan has come in terms of family policy change, we need to begin by establishing where it began. As of 1990, Japan had in place a set of labour market structures, employment rules and government programmes affecting families that was among the strongest 'male breadwinner' systems in the industrialized world. Although many women worked in their early twenties, about half of these women left employment upon marriage, and another large share quit as soon as they qualified for their 14 weeks of paid maternity leave. Women could claim unemployment benefits for an additional 90 days if they terminated employment upon child-birth, so the system offered a *de facto* bonus to help women begin their assigned roles as stay-at-home housewives taking responsibility for child-rearing.

In contrast, there was no system of childcare leave beyond the eight weeks of post-partum maternity leave, so women who wanted to stay in their jobs had to return to work almost immediately after giving birth. Although the government provided subsidized childcare services, a severe shortage of spaces for infants and limited hours forced women who wished to continue employment to turn to family members or poor-quality 'baby hotels' to care for their children until public childcare became available. The unavailability of childcare leave and services served as another factor discouraging women from attempting to stay in work after having children (Schoppa, 2006: 48).

Compounding the effects of these programmes affecting the choices available to women at child-birth were broader labour market structures that

channelled women into tracks that separated 'regular' workers from part-time and temporary workers with significantly lower pay, benefits and job security (Brinton, 1993). Regular employees were subject to rules that made termination difficult, received seniority wages and benefited from firm-based training, but in return these workers were expected to work long hours of overtime and could be transferred at the whim of the company. Most women with children found it difficult to live up to employer demands in these types of jobs. Anticipating these difficulties, many young women chose less demanding jobs even before they had children – pointed in this direction by employers who deliberately tracked workers according to their gender (Brinton, 1993; Estevez-Abe, 2005). This tracking system meant that most women facing a decision about whether to stay in work after having children were in jobs they were happy to give up. Once this decision to leave employment was made, the tracking system also served to keep women from returning to 'regular' work, since most positions open to women over 35 (age restrictions were common in job listings) were 'part time'.

Another set of tax and benefit rules encouraged married women to focus their energies on the home. If a married woman limited her hours and income to about US\$10,000 a year, she earned credits toward a basic pension as a 'dependent spouse' without having to contribute pension premiums. She also qualified the family for tax and employment benefits that were only available to such families. In combination, this set of policies served to subsidize the model family (male-breadwinner, stay-at-home wife) at the expense of families in which both husband and wife worked full time.

The set of family policies summarized here pushed so many women to give up work after child-birth that just 36 per cent of Japanese mothers of children under seven were in the workforce – many of these in part-time jobs (OECD, 2001: 134). Since those returning to work later had such limited job prospects, these policies also served to keep Japanese female wages 40 per cent below male earnings, much higher than the OECD average gender pay gap of 20 per cent.⁴

Another measure of the slower rate of progress toward a gender-equal society in Japan was the unusually low rate of male contributions to childcare

and housework in that country. Japanese husbands spent an average of just 2.5 hours a week on housework, compared to the 33.5 hours put in by their wives (Tsuya et al., 2000: 208). The expectation that women would carry the bulk of this load – by husbands, employers and women themselves – reinforced the gender tracking in the employment system described above and helped guarantee that women would pay a huge opportunity cost for their decisions to marry and have children.

In the 1990s, these male-breadwinner social structures collided with the rising expectations of Japanese women. Between 1985 and 2005, the proportion of young women advancing to four-year universities grew from just 13.7 per cent to 36.8 per cent.⁵ Most of the women finishing college entered full-time jobs. Fully 92 per cent of unmarried women aged 25–9 were in the labour market by 2000.⁶ Many of these women aspired to continue working after having children, a sharp change from attitudes that had prevailed in the 1980s when 34 per cent of single women, when asked to describe their ‘ideal life course’, reported that they wanted to be ‘full-time housewives’. By 2002 the proportion expressing this aspiration had fallen to 19 per cent.⁷

What would happen when these changing aspirations met the entrenched male-breadwinner structures of Japanese family policy? The hypotheses developed above based on the Hirschman model tell us that we need to pay particular attention to the ‘exit costs’ facing these women. Importantly, the change in aspirations described above was largely a generational one. The women who most eagerly sought careers as part of their ‘ideal life course’ were by and large single and childless, rather than mothers needing to work but with ‘no way out’ of caring for their children. Because Japanese women had won access to birth control and abortion on demand decades earlier, these women were able to delay or opt out of motherhood if they wished in order to accommodate the job expectations of the ‘regular’ track in the Japanese employment system. By the 1990s, a growing group of women was doing so (Raymo, 2003), helping to push back the age of marriage and the age at which women typically gave birth, driving the fertility rate down to 1.26 by 2005.

I should emphasize that the ‘exit option’ described here is not a complete escape from Japanese family policy, in the way that might be involved if these

women emigrated from Japan to another country. Instead, these women had the option of choosing a second-best life course. If they valued career fulfilment more than the experience of motherhood and had educational credentials that made them attractive job candidates, they could choose the career. There were in fact a larger number of women who made the opposite choice, choosing motherhood over career when faced with employers who did not offer them the option of choosing both. In 2008, the work rate for Japanese women went from 93 per cent for unmarried women 25–29 down to 31.4 per cent for women with children younger than three (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics Bureau, 2008). While some of the Japanese women leaving work after having children certainly did so because that was their preferred choice, the survey of unmarried women cited above suggests that many of them were doing so under duress.⁸

This analysis suggests that Japanese women seeking work–family balance but confronting the nation’s male-breadwinner social structures had *limited* exit options: not easy, not made quickly, often the product of indecision and doubt until the choice was finally made, in some cases by the passage of time. The exit dynamics described here placed Japan right in the middle range of exit costs where, if Hirschman is right, Japan would see neither exit-driven nor voice-driven reform.

Japan’s family policy response

When family policy suddenly rose onto the policy agenda in Japan in 1990, what put it there was not the voices of women – or men – upset about the family policy status quo but a statistical report that Japan’s fertility rate had fallen to a record low of 1.57, below the previous record low in 1966 when a large number of couples avoided giving birth in the year of the ‘fire horse’, which according to astrological lore was a particularly unlucky one for girls. The Japanese fertility rate had been falling steadily for 15 years, but it took this statistical milestone to suddenly get the public’s attention.

Immediately, politicians, pundits and government officials began asking why women were having fewer babies. Of course, men are also involved in making babies, but the opinion polling and speculation focused almost exclusively on women. Surveys

by government demographers designed to project population trends ask questions about child-bearing plans exclusively of women, so part of the reason the discourse focused on women was because that was where the data was. But when questions were asked of both genders, they hinted that this was indeed a problem generated mostly by the frustrations of *women*. When asked why they were still single, men outnumbered women only on the reason 'because I'm still too young'. In contrast, women reported in larger numbers that they remained single because 'I don't want to lose my freedom'; 'because I haven't met the right partner yet'; and 'because I want to focus on schooling and work' (MHW, 1999: 37).

Of course, it was hard to figure out how to interpret the demographic data based on survey results like these. Why exactly were women worried about their freedom and work and partners, and what policy changes, if any, might address these frustrations? It would have been helpful if women themselves had spoken up at that time to answer these questions, but organized women's groups were poorly positioned to assist in interpreting the data. That was because women's groups in Japan reflect the bifurcated choices that women have made in response to the male breadwinner status quo. The largest and oldest groups, such as the Housewives Association, are made up of women who do not work outside the home or do so only part-time. They devote their energies to causes like food safety that are related to their roles as the cooks and consumers in their families (MacLachlan, 2002: 81). Even some of the newer women's groups bring women together around these traditional roles. One of these groups is the Netto – the political wing of the Seikatsu Club Co-ops that allow members to procure food directly from producers at discount prices. With origins in the co-ops, this group naturally focuses more on consumer issues than it does on childcare services. As Robin LeBlanc (1999) has argued, the Netto is explicitly organized around the 'housewife identity' of its members – an identity that is a product in part of the choices these women made when they opted not to pursue careers. For these structural reasons, these women's groups did not step forward to interpret the motives of young, single and childless women.

Japan does have groups that are feminist, fighting for equal treatment of women in the workplace and

abortion rights, but these are much smaller and are staffed by the minority of Japanese women who stick it out in full-time jobs. Women who are active in these groups, such as Ueno Chizuko, bemoan the complacent acceptance of the male breadwinner status quo on the part of the majority of women in their country (Buckley, 1996: 276–7). Ueno was certainly willing to explain the problems inherent in Japan's patriarchal system, but her initial reactions to the news of declining fertility rates was to argue that this was not a problem. It was a sign of progress that women felt free to opt out of marriage and motherhood (Ueno, 1998). However valid her argument, it did not help to explain how couples might be induced to have more children.

It was therefore up to the young women themselves to speak up and explain their frustrations. Unfortunately, what Japan got instead was what Mikanagi Yumiko calls a 'silent revolution' (1998: 192). Large numbers of women postponed or opted out of marriage and children, but they did so one at a time without explaining their choices. The fertility drop had succeeded in getting the attention of Japanese policy elites, but before this 'exit mechanism' could generate a policy response, these elites would have to figure out what it would take to convince women to have more children and then push through these policy changes. The record of policy deliberation and implementation in response to these exit trends shows that there can be a great deal of slippage along this chain of events.

One advantage Japan enjoys is that it has a bureaucracy that collects high-quality data and has a tradition of bureaucracy-led policy innovation. Japanese officials have indeed been worrying about the looming labour shortage and declining fertility for some time. In the case of the labour shortage, these concerns peaked in the late 1980s when the Japanese economy was surging and employers were unable to find enough high quality young employees.⁹ Hoping to encourage a larger proportion of women to stay in the workforce after having children, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Labour (MOL) proposed that the government initiate a childcare leave programme to provide parents with the option of taking a full year off of work after the birth of a child, with the guarantee that they could return to their old job at the end of this period. Such a programme was initiated in 1992, and it now provides

dual-income parents with another option in their struggle to balance work responsibilities with childcare during the child's first year.

Unfortunately, a number of compromises introduced during policy deliberations ended up reinforcing traditional gender roles by disallowing or discouraging men from taking leave. First, the programme considers only the parent who is primarily responsible for childcare in a dual-income family to be eligible for leave. Male breadwinners with stay-at-home wives are therefore not eligible for any leave. For a man in a dual-income family to take leave, he must declare that he is primarily responsible for childcare and that his wife is the primary income earner. At Toyota, with 60,000 male employees, just two men were willing to make this declaration in the first decade of the programme.¹⁰

Second, faced with pressure from the employers' association to keep the cost of the programme down, the MOL was forced to make it unpaid when it was first introduced. Although the benefit level has now been increased to 40 per cent of income before the leave, this level is still too low to allow the primary income-earner in a family (usually the man) to take leave. Other compromises, in particular weak enforcement provisions, have made many women afraid that their careers will suffer if they take the full leave benefits.

If leave benefits had been a policy demanded by working women, working through the political process, the MOL might have structured the programme more like Sweden's – which provides 80 per cent of pay for 14 months and requires men to take 10 weeks' leave if the couple want to claim the full benefits. Instead, without an active women's movement demanding this change, most of the negotiations took place between the MOL and the employers' association, guaranteeing that the programme would not challenge the male breadwinner status quo. As a result of all of the compromises introduced during deliberations, the programme has so far done nothing to increase the proportion of women staying in the full-time workforce after having children. The proportion of new mothers taking leave or working continuously after childbirth stands at 22 per cent today, smaller than the 26 per cent who chose one of these paths before the national leave programme was introduced.¹¹

If bureaucrats had trouble figuring out how to influence women's decisions to stay in the workforce,

we should not be surprised that they had even more trouble trying to interpret and influence their decisions to have children. The first source of delay in the government's reaction stemmed from the difficulties demographers faced in attempting to interpret fertility data. When Japan's total fertility rate first fell below the population replacement level of 2.1 in the late 1970s, demographers were certain that the drop was only a temporary reflection of Japanese women's decisions to *postpone* child-bearing. The population projections they issued in 1981 and 1986 therefore reflected their expectation that the total fertility rate would recover to the replacement level after the women postponing child-birth had their intended two children (Yashiro, 1999: 16-17). Even after the rate dropped further during the 1990s, government demographers continued to expect a recovery. Only in the population projections issued in 2002, many years after young women began reducing their fertility, did demographers admit that the shift in behaviour was more fundamental. Large numbers of Japanese women were going to end their periods of fertility childless, many more than in the past were going to have just one child, and Japan was likely to see its fertility rate stabilize at a level of around 1.4. The delay in this realization was critical because temporary declines in fertility rates have little effect on total population levels (and the sustainability of pay-as-you-go social security systems). Only when the drop is substantial and sustained does a decline in the fertility rate become an economic problem.

Japanese bureaucrats also held off declaring declining fertility a problem because many were sensitive to concerns on the part of women and others that any effort to increase fertility might be perceived as a return to the controversial pre-war *umeyo fuyaseyo* policies associated with the militarist past. If women frustrated with the difficulties of combining work with family had voiced their concerns themselves, they would have done so much sooner and without worrying about being associated with pre-war policies. When they reacted instead by exiting, they ended up having to rely on uncertain and tentative bureaucrats, whose first proposals for responding to the decline in fertility in the 1990s, a programme known as the 'Angel Plan', focused on a modest expansion in public childcare services.

The key word in that last sentence is 'modest'. Despite the fact that this is the area where Japanese

policymakers devoted their greatest efforts during the first decade after 1990, over the 17-year period between 1989 and 2006 they succeeded in expanding only modestly the proportion of children in all-day childcare services, from 13.2 to 23.6 in the 1–2 age group, from 28.9 to 35.3 for three-year-olds, and from 24.8 to 33.1 for four- to six-year-olds (Zenkoku Hoiku Dantai Renrakukai, 1990, 2008). The vast majority of the youngest age group continues to be cared for at home, by parents or family members, and the majority of children over three remains in kindergartens, which frequently offer only half-day services. If the Japanese women opting out of motherhood had spoken for themselves, they might have explained that in order to stay in career jobs, they needed care services that were much closer to those offered by French crèches, écoles maternelles and other subsidized options which together offer all-day care for 38 per cent of children under three and 100 per cent of children aged three to six (Morgan, 2006: 14). Instead, while Japanese childcare services supported working mothers to a greater extent than before, they still left gaps in years and hours that made it difficult for women to hold on to career jobs without the support of their own parents or other relatives to fill in.

This gap, of course, was also a product of the inflexibility of Japan's labour markets, especially for career jobs. With a narrow focus on childcare services during the first half of the 1990s, Japanese bureaucrats ignored this aspect of the problem until 1997 when a new population projection revealed a bigger problem than had been admitted up to that point. By this time, officials like Mukuno Michiko who was leading this study were starting to realize that much more far-reaching changes in Japanese social structures were needed, including a transformation of employment structures to reduce opportunity costs for mothers. It was at this time that the MHW and associated agencies published a series of reports (Jinkō Mondai Shingikai, 1997; MHW, 1999; PMO, 2000) that laid out this prescription and featured the regression line mentioned in the introduction.

The problem was that a regression line and bureaucratic opinion were not enough to spur the adoption of either the Nordic or the French model, much less push through the far-reaching changes needed not

only in government policy but also in the practices of private employers and husbands. In 1998, the MHW went so far as to create a People's Committee to Promote a Response to Declining Fertility, composed of interest group representatives, in order to build support for their initiatives, but this body was a poor substitute for a grassroots movement calling for changes in the male breadwinner status quo. Both the MHW and the MOL published posters calling on men to do more housework and take childcare leave, but this too was a poor substitute for a movement by working women with children pressuring their husbands to reduce their working hours and do more to help out at home.

Compounding the difficulty faced by the MHW bureaucrats seeking progressive policy change was the sudden emergence of an alternative explanation for declining fertility: 'parasite singles'. Sociologist Yamada Masahiro (1999) argued that women were having fewer children, not because they sought careers, but because they were too comfortable living at home with their parents – raising doubts about whether a set of policies aimed at reducing opportunity costs would actually boost the fertility rate. Yashiro Naohiro, a scholar and government advisor involved in policy debates during this period, reports that this rival hypothesis served to take the steam out of the movement toward labour market reform and other fundamental changes.¹² Again, if women had been using 'voice' to tell policymakers, employers and husbands what they wanted, there would have been less uncertainty at this critical moment.

Instead of opening up the labour market to more lateral mobility that would allow mothers to exit and re-enter the workforce more flexibly, reforms adopted in the wake of the provocative late-1990s government reports have been limited to the introduction of flexi-time options. Firms have been encouraged to give parents of young children the option of working shorter hours, allowing these parents to resume regular working hours once their children are older. Lacking mandates and penalties against employers who punish parents who choose this option, and still lacking bargaining power because of the absence of a lateral job market, mothers have found these labour market reforms falling far short of providing the work–family balance they seek. A decade after this critical period, it is striking that even the 'progressive' Democratic Party of Japan, which took power for the first time in 2009,

is focusing its family policy entirely on expanded child allowances that will do nothing to challenge the male breadwinner status quo instead of pushing for the more fundamental changes that are needed. The fertility rate rose slightly to 1.34 in 2007, but it remains among the lowest in the industrialized world.

Conclusions

Japan is frequently described as a 'late developer', and it is certainly true that many of the economic and social changes it has experienced over the past century have come a generation or two after the most rapidly-industrialized nations. It is tempting, therefore, to imagine that it is only a matter of time before the emergence of 'postmodern values' in Japan sweeps away its male-breadwinner social structures. Indeed, there is evidence that younger cohorts of women in contemporary Japan have extended their educational and employment aspirations in much the way women in Sweden and other early developers did before them.

These trends make the slow pace of change in social structures affecting the ability of mothers to balance work with family – employment rules, work conditions, childcare policy and gendered housework norms – quite puzzling. Why haven't we seen vibrant women's organizations pushing for these changes in the way women did elsewhere? The Hirschman framework, applied to the analysis of women's movements in this article, suggests that the explanation lies in variations in 'exit dynamics' facing women in the two eras. We cannot assume that the rise of postmodern values and the associated shifts in gender role aspirations will play out in Japan the way they did 40 years ago in Sweden because in the interim all of these nations have seen broad shifts in fertility patterns. Women made their push for equality in Sweden at a time when the vast majority of women had children at a young age. Securing equality under these circumstances forced women to fight for social changes that would allow women to balance work with family.

In contrast, the ability of Japanese women to win the battle for control over their bodies, and in particular their fertility, *before* securing far-reaching changes in male-breadwinner social structures has left the current generation of young Japanese women with a very different set of exit options. Faced with work rules and childcare policies that make it difficult both to work and have children, women can and are now opting in

large numbers not to have children or to have just one in order to minimize the difficulties of balancing the conflicting demands. The ability to exit, or at least postpone motherhood well into their thirties, the challenge of combining working and having children means few young women today are motivated by the struggle – the inability to exit – to demand changes in social policy or even to demand that men do more housework. The social structure goes unchallenged or changed only very slightly, even as the fertility rate drops lower.

Finally, the article examined the possibility that the exit choices of Japanese women – the drop in the fertility rate, the decision of many other women to leave the workforce in order to focus on raising children – might be motivating policy change through a process where policymakers respond to market signals. The Hirschman framework suggests that we should not expect political leaders in systems designed to respond to voice to pick up on market signals very quickly or respond to them with any degree of efficiency. Indeed, although it is true that family policy in Japan is today viewed in a much more instrumental sense (as a way to boost fertility rates), Japanese policymakers were slow to call the drop in fertility rates a 'problem' and had difficulty determining what to do in response or how to push through controversial and expensive initiatives. Without women's groups telling them what's wrong and using their muscle to push for change, bureaucrats have been sorely tested in their ability to engineer a gender role revolution from above.

Notes

- 1 Toivonen (2007) documents the emergence of the Nordic model as a prescriptive model in both government reports and expert commentary during this period. For the regression analysis cited here, see Prime Minister's Office (2000: 45).
- 2 The proportion of women over 15 working as regular employees grew from 24 per cent in 1980 to 31 per cent in 1995, at which point it levelled off (calculations based on data in *Japanese Statistical Yearbook 2009*: 491–5).
- 3 Eurostat Demography Database. For a fuller elaboration of the comparison with Sweden, see Schoppa (2005).
- 4 The Japanese gender pay gap was above 40 per cent in 1985 and 1995 and fell just below this level in 1999 (see OECD, 2001: 139).
- 5 Data from the Japanese Ministry of Education.
- 6 Data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics Bureau.
- 7 The proportion wishing to combine work with child-rearing, either concurrently or sequentially, grew from 50 per cent in 1987 to 66 per cent in 2002 (data from

- the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research survey of unmarried women aged 25 to 34, see NIPSSR, 2003).
- 8 Half of the unmarried women surveyed who reported that they would *ideally* like to continue working after marrying and having children told the survey team that they *expected* they would only be able to go back to work after giving up their careers for several years to raise children. Likewise, almost a third of those who *hoped* to leave work temporarily to raise children and then go back to work *expected* they would end up as full-time housewives (1997 survey of unmarried women aged 25 to 34 reported in NIPSSR, 1999: 71).
 - 9 This section draws on Schoppa (2006: 162–82).
 - 10 Interview with Katō Yoshirō from the Personnel section of Toyota, 9 December 2002.
 - 11 Of women married in 1995–7 who have had a first child, 11 per cent took leave and another 11 continued working in the year after childbirth; of women married in the early 1980s who had a first child, 22 per cent continued working full-time and 4 per cent took leave (under employer-specific plans, since the national programme was not in place at the time) (see NIPSSR, 2003: 68).
 - 12 Author's interview with Yashiro, 20 December 2002.
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