

Work-life Balance in Japan from the Gender Perspective: A Critical Assessment

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Introduction: Why work-life balance in Japan

The deregulation of Japanese labour market has brought flexibility of work and then the rapid destruction of Japanese-style employment practices. And furthermore, the declining birthrate in Japan has been seriously considered as a ‘problem’.

In this context, policy makers and scholars have promoted work-life balance policy in Japan. The public debate of work –life balance, however, has been held in terms of neoclassical economics and feminists interested in policy issues cannot afford to ignore its power.

Feminist economists have struggled to examine the interface between the family and the labour market. I think that the methodological individualism of neoclassical economics bypasses real-world problems which women face.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section II presents some basic

information on background of work-life balance policy in Japan. Section III examines the logic of the work-life balance in Japan, both theoretically and politically, and Section IV concludes the paper.

Section II : Some background

a) Deregulation of labour market

Rapid globalization and a long-term recession after the collapse of the Japanese bubble economy since the late 1980s has led to a surprising increase in the number of workers in non-regular employment.

In 1995 *Nikkeiren* (the Japanese Federation of Employer's Organizations) published a remarkable report : *Japanese Management in the New Era* . The report proposed a radically new system of personal management after the bubble economy. The report classified workers into three categories:

- 1) long-term regular workers who expand their capabilities,
- 2) fixed-term contract workers or dispatch workers with highly professional abilities,
- 3) flexible contract employees: casual, part-time, and temporary workers.

These three types of workers provide 'the employment portfolio'. Non regular workers consist of category 2) and 3) and now are

one-third of the whole workers in Japan, and workers in the third category are predominantly female. In 2005, almost half of working women (49.3 per cent compared with 15 per cent of working men) were non-regular. They are paid considerably less and have fewer training and promotion opportunities than regular workers.

a) Declining birthrate in Japan

1.57 shock: the trend of declining birthrate draws attention

In Japan, the '1.57 shock' of 1989 led to a serious debate on the declining birthrate and the decreasing number of children. Since then, the policy maker has settled upon some countermeasures against declining birthrate as follows:

- ***Angel Plan*** (1994, 1999)
- ***Next Generation Nurturing Support Measures Promotion Act*** (2003)
- ***Raising Children/Child Assistance Plan*** (2004)
- ***New Countermeasure Against the Declining Birthrate*** (2006)
- ***Work-Life Balance Charter*** (2007)

According to ***Work-life Balance Charter***, the basic approach in achieving a balance between an individual's work and personal life is to discuss between labour and management and effective way for each and every firms. Although it is assumed that the state and local governments also support the efforts of firms,

individuals, and citizens, the idea of the *Charter* is fundamentally based on the employment-first policy.

■ *New Childcare leave system* (2010)

■ *New Child Allowance* (2010)

Section III: The logic of work-life balance policy in Japan

In these contexts, there are two views of work-life balance in Japan.

a) Work-life balance policy should be posed in terms of the deregulation of labour market. This view is fundamentally based on the neoclassical economics,

b) Work-life balance policy should be pursued as the measure against declining birthrate. This view is fundamentally based on 'the preference theory' (Hakim 2000) and is connected with 'feminist neoclassical economics' (Gustafsson 1997).

a) **Work-life balance policy in terms of deregulation of labour market based on neoclassical economics**

This view allows two interpretations as follows.

1) Work-life balance policy is connected with the diversity of working style, either regular work or non-regular work, and with the balancing between work and life caused by free choices by self-sufficient individuals. However, in the present condition,

there are dichotomy between a long working time of regular worker and short working time of non-regular worker, pay gap between regular worker and non-regular worker, wage inequality between male and female, and sexual division of labour. According to this view, the *Japanese employment practice* is the main obstacle to barrier against the diversity of working style, i.e. work-life balance, because of the strong protection of status of regular worker. This view insists that Japanese employment practices and protection by labour law should be weakened.(Yashiro 2009)

2) Work-life balance as a measure of dissolution of the statistical discrimination and of the equal employment opportunity between men and women.

As is known, the statistical discrimination is a part of Becker's Human Capital Theory. It holds that firm has a tendency to discriminate women in terms of human capital investment, since women, on average, retire early from their jobs for marriage and childbirth.

While Becker said that whatever exists must be optimal and rational, Yamaguchi(2009) insists that a strong statistical discrimination in Japan is caused by irrational behaviour of firms.

Yamaguchi said that the cause of the statistical

discrimination is mainly Japanese employment practices which aim at a protection of male regular worker. At the same time, he also insists that Japanese labour management should be based on the result-oriented pay system as in the American model, i.e., market-first model.

As mentioned above, two interpretations of work-life balance in terms of deregulation of work are both based on the neoclassical economics. I think that this view of work-life balance is wrong in two respects. First, the view insists that the deregulation of labour market will lead to the diversity of working style and dissolution of statistical discrimination, then the dissolution of sex discrimination. However, the dissolution of sex discrimination is connected with the system of equal pay for equal work, which is realizable through intervention of labour law. Second, this view (and furthermore neoclassical economics itself) is wrong in terms of the presumption that the labour market is level playing field. In reality, the women come to it burdened down with domestic baggage. This view neglect both the source of women's preference and the constraints which women face. (Humphries 1998)

1) Work-life balance policy as the measure against declining birthrate

This view is based on ‘the preference theory’(Hakim 2000) and ‘feminists neoclassical economics’(Gutafsson 1997).

First, I would like to define of the preference theory and feminst neoclassical economics.

According to Hakim(2000), ‘Preference theory is concerned primarily with women’s choice between family work and market work: genuine choice in affluent modern societies.’(ibid.) Hakim distinguished women’s preference group into three types, home –centered, work-centered, and adaptive (work/life, but very responsible to all policies).

And moreover, I also define the feminist neo-classical economics. According to Gustafsson, ‘The feminist neo-classical economics argue that feminist economics will improve neo-classical theory by removing its male bias and may thus reveal mechanisms by which the overall efficiency of the economy can be increased.’ (Gustafsson 1997)

It is, however, essentially based on the neo-classical economics’ framework and in particular on methodological individualism.(Hara 2004) The work-life balance policy settled by the ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare basically is based on the Hakim’s preference theory connected with feminist neoclassical economics and so far has focused on the *women’s* work/life preference.

However, in reality, how can the women who burden a care

in family make a choice either family work or market work? In particular, single mothers who are burdened with care work in family and paid work in market, may not have a 'genuine choice'. Who has the right of choice based on their own preferences? According to this neo-classical economics' view, including feminist neoclassical economics' view, those people, mostly but not exclusively women, who have care responsibility are on an equal footing with those without care responsibility in this context. Women are supposed to choose a 'life' for care responsibility and men are supposed to choose a 'life' for self-enlightenment. Here, the meaning of life is very controversial.(Lewis and Campbell 2008)

SectionIV: Towards a work-family balance policy based on the 'family-friendly economics'

As I mentioned, the work-life balance policy in Japan is fundamentally based on the neoclassical economics. I think that the methodological individualism of neoclassical economics bypassed real-world problem which women face.

I also think that this issue has two implications as follows:

- 1) Work-family balance policy is highly gender issue in which

the meaning of care, i.e. unpaid work in the household is critical in the social reproduction. Therefore, work-life policy based on work-first policy and market-first policy is wrong. It is important for the genuine reconciliation between work and family-life to understand the source of preference and the particular constraints which women face, i.e. 'gendered concept of rationality' (Humphries 1997)

- 2) I also hold with emphasis that the genuine way of reconciliation between work and family life is not the work-life balance policy but the work-family policy. Work-life balance policy is work-first and based on the dichotomy of the time in which time is divided between work and life (leisure). On the other hand, work family policy is based on the trichotomy in which time is divided work, care, and life. This is a gender perspective in the work-family policy. Moreover, to respond to this gender perspective would involve major changes in the conventional economics in terms of criticism on the dichotomy of the time.

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