CHAPTER TWO

THE EMERGENCE OF THE HOUSEWIFE AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN HER POSITION

1. Married Women Become Housewives and a Source of Labor

1.1. Our Focus: Housewives and Women’s Advance into Society

Our study of patriarchy begins with an examination of where married women have been positioned in society. We will trace the emergence of the housewife and the changes that have occurred in her situation by looking at gender-based allocations of power and roles. We define a housewife as a married woman economically dependent on her husband’s earnings and responsible for housework—for domestic chores removed from the sphere of production.

*Shufu*, the word for housewife in Japanese, has two different uses, which seem very close, but they have different shades of meaning. Traditionally, the housewife was the woman who took charge of a family’s domestic work and had the right (*shamoji ken*) to decide how meals would be prepared and dished out. The other meaning of the word as it is frequently used today is closer to the idea of “the woman taking care of the home,” which also means that the housewife is the person in charge of housework. The former meaning has the nuance of the housewife being mistress of a large household, something like an important landlady. She took charge of the younger women in the extended family (often her daughters-in-law) and supervised the work of servants and other household employees. This image is now all but lost.

Worldwide, the contemporary housewife in industrialized countries is almost always responsible for the housework of a single home. We will use this meaning as we examine how the mode of existence for women known as housewives emerged in Japan and elsewhere. This will enable an analysis of gender-based distributions of power and social roles; and it will secure a strategic base from which we can indict the system. Why? First of all, in societies that have attained a certain level of industrialization, housewife is often the most common role allocated to women. Secondly, in many societies, women are educated and socialized for little else than to join the ranks of a reserve army of housewives.
If the life of the housewife is the dominant manner in which women are expected to live, analyzing this mode of life involves describing and explaining the core mechanisms used in distributing power and roles on the basis of gender. In our analysis patriarchy and industrialism will be handled as independent variables, and the interaction between them will be clarified. This will enable us to learn how the norms governing gender differences are used, and we can come closer to gaining a full picture of women's status in each society we examine. Although I refer to neo-Marxist feminists’ ideas in developing my theory, my stance is far from that of a Marxist in that I consider socialism to have been another path taken by industrialism. Rather than a system that came after capitalism, socialism has been one approach to solving the problems faced in early industrialization.

Using the housewife as a standard of comparison will also help bring into sharper focus issues related to her role—issues such as the treatment of married women as workers or how men should live their lives. In grasping “women's advance into society,” data on the housewife will serve our purpose as an axis of comparison.1

Why focus on housewives? Our discussion may seem to be one-sided—only about married women, when we say we are putting patriarchy on the block for analysis. While it is true that the overarching issue is the nature of the relationships between men and women, this book will mainly describe the conditions and problems women face. For the most part, men's issues will be set aside. We do this for several reasons. First of all, it is easier to discern the course of change when we center our attention on women rather than men. The man's main role in the family has almost always been that of the breadwinner, the member the others rely on to earn a living. In contrast, even though they have never been able to escape

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1 Two types of moves might be taken to rectify the imbalance in the allocation of men's and women's roles. Men could enter women's domain and women could enter men's. Either move might be meaningful, but in practice, very few men become house-husbands, and the latter move has occurred with overwhelmingly more frequency. Even if the role of housewife is positively evaluated, it is unrealistic to expect more than a relatively few men to become house-husbands. With calls from some quarters for a work-life balance and appeals being made for men to participate more in home life, which I totally agree with, the situation has shown signs of gradual change, but it is difficult to describe this as a big transition, and general conditions are not likely to rapidly change. Therefore, it is “women advancing into society,” in the form of their fully entering the workplace, that is likely to have a real impact, contributing greatly to eliminating the unfairness inherent in the current allocation of men's and women's roles. It is for this reason that we discuss “women advancing” in the sense of a full advance into the workplace. No other value judgment is intended.