CHILD CARE AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN LOW-FERTILITY JAPAN

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1. Introduction

Total fertility rates in both Germany and Japan are far below the replacement level of 2.1 and below the OECD average, calculated from the fertility rate of 25 countries. They hover around 1.37 (i.e., Germany in 2007, Japan in 2008) and are caused by multiple factors, among them the delay of marriage and motherhood.

Faced at the same time with rapid ageing, policy makers in both Germany and Japan try to reverse the trend and raise their fertility rates through numerous social programmes and policies. But enticing their citizens to have more children is a difficult challenge. Both countries look enviously to countries like Sweden and France, where the birth rate is admirably high in comparison. These countries are used for comparison and as role models of countries that have succeeded in managing to reverse their fertility rate trends successfully.

Ever since Japanese policy makers have started to concern themselves with the declining birth rate – a trend that began in the early 1970s, but was not a public (or political) issue until 1989 – the provision and improvement of child care, specifically day care services, were at the forefront of governmental concerns and efforts. These low fertility countermeasures (summarily called shōshika taisaku) have remained an important issue until today. In recent years – and much later than Japan – the German government too has put a special focus on improving the net of institutionalized day care provisions.

In addition, as recently as 2007, the Japanese government, specifically the Cabinet Office (Naikakufu), turned to the improvement of people’s

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1 In the year 2005, Sweden had a total fertility rate of 1.77 and France of 1.94, in contrast to 1.34 in Germany and 1.26 in Japan (OECD 2008b).
2 In this year the total fertility rate fell to a record low of 1.57. The media coined the term “1.57 shock” to accompany this process with numerous articles on the fertility issue. For more information, see Naikakufu (2009a: 2–3).
3 In regards to improving the day care system, the government developed several plans (e.g., the Angel Plan and New Angel Plan). For detailed information on the dozen plus policies and measures, see Naikakufu (2009a: 28–33).
work-life balance as the latest possible solution in the fight against the low birth rate. That is why, in December 2007, the government created the so-called Charter for Work-Life Balance and the Action Policy for Promoting Work-Life Balance, and announced the year 2008 as ‘Work-Life Balance Gannen’, the inaugural year of work-life balance. Specific goals of the work-life balance charter include: increasing the employment rate of women and the elderly, reducing part-time work and overtime, and increasing the rate of people taking their annual paid leave from currently 47 to 100 per cent.

Yet obstacles in implementing these goals are plenty, such as insufficient financial backing by the government and a charter that ‘lacks teeth’, because penalties for non-compliant companies are non-existent. Without penalties, compliance is likely to remain low. Experience with the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) has shown that it is easier to change social policy programmes and laws than ingrained habits, customs, and social norms (Holthus 2008a).4

This chapter focuses on the case of Japan, but from a partially comparative German perspective. Combining the two elements of child care and work-life balance in a nationwide, non-representative survey for parents who have at least one child enrolled in a day care centre, this chapter aims to facilitate understanding of how these elements actually play out in peoples’ everyday lives. Questions of the 2008 survey were geared to help understand parental utilization of as well as experience and satisfaction with institutionalized child care services, and thus the parents’ actual work-life balance, their challenges of combining employment with raising children, as well as the roles, use and necessities of other care givers beyond the net of parental and institutionalized child care.

2. Low Fertility and Female Employment

A major contributing factor to the declining fertility rate in Japan and Germany is the fact that many women delay having children to a

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4 The work-life balance campaign of the Cabinet Office urges people to change and improve their personal work styles, suggesting that making a daily To-Do list and trying to keep meetings to one hour, for example, can lead to changes of people's lives. But the efforts are put solely into the hands of individual employees, freeing companies of their responsibility to do their part: “A no-cost idea with a cute mascot – but with a doubtful outcome” (Holthus 2008c: 1).