CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHANGING FAMILY LIFE CYCLE AND PARTNERSHIP TRANSITION—GENDER ROLES AND MARRIAGE PATTERNS

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1. Introduction

The family formation process has changed dramatically in Japan over the past 20–30 years. Marriage is being delayed to progressively later ages, a growing proportion of Japanese men and women will likely never marry, the prevalence of premarital cohabitation has increased, and the likelihood of lifelong marriage has decreased substantially. Theoretical explanations for these dramatic changes in family behaviour have emphasized increasing economic independence for women, declining economic prospects for less educated men, changing attitudes toward marriage and family, extended coresidence with parents, and shifting marriage market composition. Although similar patterns of family change and associated explanations characterize most industrialized countries, distinctive features of the Japanese experience provide important insights into the mechanisms underlying observed change. For example, the decline in Japanese marriage rates has not only been particularly rapid, but has also been most pronounced among highly educated women. Interpretations of this distinctive pattern of change have emphasized the highly asymmetric division of domestic labour between husbands and wives and the associated difficulty that women face in balancing family and full-time work.

A similar emphasis on gender context has emerged in recent discussions of very low fertility in Europe. Substantial declines in marriage and fertility—often described as part of a “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe 1995; Van de Kaa 1987)—have occurred in all industrialized societies but have been most dramatic in societies characterized by “strong families” (Reher 1998) and relatively low gender equality. Attempts to understand the observed decline in the negative correlation between female labour force participation and fertility (Kögel 2004)
have highlighted the potential importance of tension between growing economic opportunities for women in the labour market and limited change in men’s and women’s roles within the family (e.g., Blossfeld 1995; Chesnais 1996; Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2002; McDonald 2000a, 2000b). The basic argument is that women with access to sufficient resources will postpone (or avoid) marriage and childbearing in societies where family formation is relatively incompatible with other pursuits—especially paid employment.

Japan is clearly a society in which women encounter great difficulty in balancing full-time work with family responsibilities. Tension between work and family is reflected in the distinctive M-shape of the age-specific labour force participation rates of Japanese women and arises from the limited availability of flexible day care (Yu 2001), men’s long work hours and relatively inflexible work schedules (Ogasawara 2001), husbands’ very limited participation in housework and child care (Tsuya et al. 2005), a strong belief in the value of maternal care provision for preschool age children (Hirao 2001), and heavy parental involvement in children’s education (Tsuya and Choe 2004). In this context, some scholars have argued that, as changes in social and economic opportunities for women outside of marriage reduce the economic necessity of marriage, women have become increasingly critical of the “Japanese wife’s subordinated and highly domesticated position within the family” (Tsuya and Mason 1995: 162) and increasingly hesitant to enter a marriage in which they are expected to assume such a position.

This chapter consists of three sections. In the first section, we draw upon data from the Japanese census, Vital Statistics, National Fertility Surveys, and other sample surveys to summarize trends in the transition to marriage. We also discuss related trends in divorce and non-marital cohabitation and the dramatic increase in the heterogeneity of the family life course in Japan. In the second section, we summarize trends in attitudes toward marriage and family. We do not make any attempt to causally link changes in attitudes and changes in behaviour but highlight a growing ambivalence toward marriage and scepticism regarding the benefits of marriage. We also discuss gender differences in attitudes toward marriage and family life. In the third section, we provide a brief overview of posited explanations for these changes. In this section, we place particular emphasis on recent work by Raymo and colleagues (Raymo 2003a; Raymo and Iwasawa 2005; Raymo and Ono 2006) emphasizing how a focus on gender relationships within