CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

FAMILY POLICY: FRAMEWORK AND CHALLENGES

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1. Introduction

Family support policies are typically categorized according to the nature and level of social rights and services available, such as paid child-care leave, child-care services, family and child allowances, tax policies, and early-childhood education (e.g., Gauthier 1996; O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999; Schoppa 2006; Ueno 1998; Boling 1998; Peng 2002). In Japan, these policies are not “family policies” (kazoku seisaku) per se, but rather “measures to counter the declining birth rate” (shōshika taisaku). Accordingly, Japanese family policies have developed closely with concerns about declining fertility rates, particularly since the “1.57 shock” of 1990, when the total fertility rate for the previous year fell to a post-war low. The family policy framework has broadened significantly over time, as the government has attempted to counteract more causes of the declining birth rate, and existing educational and social welfare policies have been adapted to reflect concerns about the low birth society. Even so, government expenditures for children and families account for about 3.8 per cent of the social security budget, compared to 70 per cent for the elderly. About three-quarters of Japanese family policies fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW). This chapter examines the development of Japanese family policies and considers various challenges to program success and further development of family policies.

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Japanese family policies have developed through three successive five-year plans: the Angel Plan, New Angel Plan, and the Children and Childrearing Support Plan. The Japanese government initially hesitated to tackle family policies openly and assertively due to its history of aggressively pro-natalist wartime policies exhorting women to “give birth and multiply” (umeyo fuyaseyo) for the sake of the nation (Miyake 1991), though the government has played a crucial role in regulating reproduction even in the post-war era (Norgren 2001; Takeda 2005; chapter 34). After the 1.57 shock, some women’s groups and feminists invoked the wartime mantra to ward off government intervention in women’s private reproductive choices, while suggesting that the declining birth rate represented a “birth strike” by women against male-dominated society (Ogino 1993). Over time, however, voices opposing policy intervention waned and government policymakers turned their attention to explicit analysis of the causes of the declining birth rate and policy remedies (Schoppa 2006). As MHLW policymakers have begun to realize that the declining birth rate is a much bigger issue than a working women’s problem, they have also targeted support for stay-at-home mothers and encouraged fathers to take on greater domestic responsibilities. Moreover, social problems ostensibly unrelated to the declining birth rate such as child abuse have been incorporated into the policy framework. The declining birth rate has spurred interest in a wide variety of issues related to the healthy upbringing of children, especially given concern about the faltering ability of families to bring children in the world and help them grow into self-sufficient adults.

2.1. Angel Plans

The Japanese government was slow to develop its first programmatic response to the declining birth rate, the Angel Plan, although it organized a meeting of twelve relevant ministries and agencies to study the childrearing environment in August 1990 immediately after the 1.57 shock. Following these meetings, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW)\(^2\) took the lead in sponsoring a two-year “Welcome Baby” campaign to raise awareness about childrearing. The campaign featured a

\(^2\) In 2001 the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) and the Ministry of Labour (MOL) merged to become the so-called Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW).