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MANDATORY PATERNITY LEAVE IS THE KEY TO WOMENOMICS

Rui Matsukawa

- Although female labor participation is over 70% in Japan, the gender gap remains large in terms of the wage and the proportion of women in decision-making roles. One significant factor is that in Japan, the burden of housekeeping falls primarily to women.
- Childbirth leave, even if only for two or three weeks, nudges men to start playing their part in housework and family duties. However, the rate of men who take childcare leave remains staggeringly low at a mere 6.16%.
- I believe paternity leave should be made mandatory. A mandatory childcare leave immediately after birth will combat the declining birthrate, empower women, and make men happier. It's a way for Japan to have its cake and eat it too, with extra frosting and sprinkles on top.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Female empowerment has seen significant progress in Japan ever since the current Abe government, inaugurated in 2012, made it one of its key themes. Female labor participation is over 70%--higher than the OECD average. A greater percentage of women in Japan are in the workforce nowadays compared to the U.S. However, the wage gap between genders remains large, and although there has been an improvement, the proportion of Japanese women in decision-making roles pales in comparison to other developed nations. In a nutshell, Japanese women have jobs, but many of those jobs are secondary-type jobs such as part-time positions. This is due not so much to their wishes but more because of external factors. One significant factor is that in Japan, the burden of housekeeping falls primarily to women.

This is the phenomenon that is often called “one-operation childcare/housework”. Japanese women spend 7 hours and 41 minutes per day on average on domestic duties and childcare. The average for men is 1 hour 7 minutes, and if we focus on domestic chores, there is a 7-fold difference. Compared to other countries, Japanese men are not performing their fair share of household tasks. This means women do the bulk of childcare and domestic work, and that many Japanese men unfortunately do not experience the joys of parenting.

There are only 24 hours in a day; this is true for every person, regardless of gender, nationality, or age. When women are spending the majority of their day on childcare and chores, it is simply impossible for them to flourish in the workplace like men do, and it's no wonder few women consider having a second or third child. The burden is simply too heavy. Financial support alone is not enough to make women want to have multiple children--including offering incentives for additional births or making preschool free of charge. This is backed by statistics. Households where men participate more in domestic affairs are more likely to have multiple children; in households with a noncommittal husband, a second child is less likely to be born.

Childbirth leave, even if only for two or three weeks, nudges men to start playing their part in housework and family duties. This leave period provides the best hands-on training for new fathers. The baby is born, Dad takes care of the baby along with Mom, tends to Mom, and involves himself in housework. This creates the basis for the new family and encourages the sharing of responsibilities further on. France has successfully recovered its birth rate and allowed women to pursue their careers by obliging men to take two weeks off when their child is born.

On paper, Japan's childcare leave policy is one of the best and most generous in the world. The system grants new parents leave until the child's first birthday. Men

can split their time off into two installments. Benefits assure 80% of regular income. However, over 20 years after its establishment, the rate of men who take childcare leave remains staggeringly low at a mere 6.16%. This stands in stark contrast to the rates for women, which eclipses 80%.

Why does such a situation exist, when roughly 80% of new male workers are interested in taking parental leave? How is this possible, when the current legislature obliges companies to let employees take time off when they request it? It is not so much that new fathers are not requesting leave, but more that they cannot: their workplace environment discourages them from doing so.

According to a 2017 survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, male employees who wanted to take childcare leave but did not do so cited the following reasons: (1) Their companies could not afford to lose workers because of hectic work schedules, 27.8%, (2) The workplace culture made them reluctant, 25.4%, (3) They were in charge of a project and were crucial to its success, 19.5%.

There are two main problems behind the reluctance to request leave: a workplace culture or atmosphere that does not view paternity leave favorably, and an inflexible workstyle.

Therefore, I believe paternity leave should be made mandatory. This should not be the obligation of individual employees, but rather an obligation on the part of employers. As soon as companies find out that an employee's spouse is expecting, they must encourage the father-to-be to take time off work, regardless of whether they receive a request.

This will prove beneficial for companies as well. 80% of new male recruits wish to take advantage of paternity leave. In this time of labor shortage, if companies want to retain high-quality employees, they must change their management style and culture to cater to their wishes. Japan has an increasing need to accommodate a diverse workforce with individual working styles, including foreign workers, and this mandatory childcare leave could be a catalyst for the modularization of jobs.

A mandatory childcare leave immediately after birth will combat the declining birthrate, empower women, and make men happier. It will likely prove effective in preventing child abuse and lead to a decrease in divorce rates. It's a way for Japan to have its cake and eat it too, with extra frosting and sprinkles on top. 

Rui Matsukawa is a member of the House of Councilors.