〔Artcle〕

Gender Equality Dilemma in Japanese Society:

How Traditional Ideas Affect both Women and Men

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要　旨

１．問題意識

　日本経済の課題の一つとして財政再建・健全化が国際的にも指摘されているとは言え、日本の経済力は世界トップレベルにあることは広く認知されていよう。しかし、日本もかつては援助受益国であった。近代化の議論にもしばしば出てくるが日本が直面しているジェンダー問題に目を向けた場合、日本の開発過程は果たして‘理想’通りと言えるのであろうか。

２．テーマと構成

　本論文では、日本が経済成長を遂げる中で置き去りにされているジェンダー平等化のジレンマについて論じたい。まず、経済成長を最優先にした開発では不十分である点と近代化の議論について触れ、次に‘traditional ideas’と日本のジェンダー不平等の関連性に注目する。そして、政府の方針がどのような影響を持ってきたかについて述べたい。また、今後の日本の開発過程でジェンダー不平等がもたらすマイナス面、女性と男性それぞれが直面している問題にも目を向ける。最後に、エンパワーメントアプローチが解決策になりうるのかについて論じたい。

３．結果

　女性の労働環境には多くの制限があることが様々なデータからうかがえ、ジェンダー問題の一例として挙げられる。女性は‘良き妻として、良き母として’という‘traditional ideas’に縛られることが少なからずあるのではないだろうか。また、男性も‘男らしさ、一家の大黒柱として’という観念のもとで複雑な状況に置かれていることも理解する必要がある。ジェンダー平等化のジレンマを解決する為に今までに、様々な法律が施行されてはいるがどれも特効薬になっているとは言いがたい。人々の考え方や慣習などを政策にもっと反映させる必要がある。また、「自らの可能性に気付き自ら行動を起す」というエンパワーメントアプローチが一つの解決策になるのではないかと考えられる。

INTRODUCTION

Japan is considered to be one of the most economically powerful countries in the world. However, after World War II, it has been the recipient of development aid. The astonishing development that has taken place in Japan has been the central topic of discussion in the modernisation theory. This is because the American Occupation Force had a strong influence on the development process in Japan, with respect to democratic reforms, land reforms, dissolution of the zaibatsu (financial cliques) and the emancipation of trade unions (Yamada 1998). These reforms contributed significantly to Japan's post-war development. On the other hand, traditional ideas still persist in Japanese society. Modernisation theorists believe that economic advancement could eliminate the traditional kinship-based society; however, some theorists critically assessed the modernisation theory from the perspective of the Japanese experience (Webster 1990). I will also critically examine this theory because, although Japan is characterised by high economic standards and welfare access, these features are not sufficient to ensure a high quality life for all citizens. Therefore, I argue that even though the country has made significant economic achievements, it is still faced with this one problem: gender inequality. One cause of such inequality lies in the cultural and traditional beliefs of Japanese society, whereby men impose restrictions on women, and women themselves limit their own choices significantly. In addition, government policies tend to perpetuate this inequality. I examine how these traditional ideas acts as an impediment to the further development of Japan and its citizens. Further, I indicate the consequences of marginalising women in the process of economic development. I also discuss whether men actually benefit from this gender inequality. Finally, I assess the concept of empowering women as a solution to this issue.

MODERNISATION THEORY

The modernisation theory was widely acknowledged during the 1950s and 1960s by American social scientists (Webster 1990; Gilman 2003). They argued that third world countries are unable to advance because they are controlled and restricted, in a Western sense, by traditional ideas; for example, the kinship system controls economic, political and legal relationships (Webster 1990). On the other hand, people in modern societies do not have fatalistic attitudes; instead, they believe in being innovative in order to overcome the obstacles in their lives, particularly 'in business affairs, thus reflecting a strong entrepreneurial spirit and a rational, scientific approach to the world' (Webster 1990:50). Moreover, geographical and social changes reduce the value placed on kinship, thus weakening familial bonds (Webster 1990).

However, Webster (1990) and Werlin (2003) asserted that the modern, Western industrial society has always held traditional values. By way of an example, Webster (1990) stated the case of Japanese companies: although Japan is one of the most advanced countries in the world, most Japanese companies still refer to employee age, background and family responsibilities when deciding on payment levels and promotions. Therefore, the modernisation theory cannot be applied to the development processes

of all societies. This theory received a lot of criticism, and Gilman (2003) suggested that the theory failed because it did not take into account Western gender concepts in the process of development. This is a valid point because Japanese social structure reveals a strong gender division of labour. In Japan, economic advancement encouraged the traditional concept wherein men's long working hours were admired; this was considered to be a major factor contributing to the economic development. Thus, gender inequality actually underpins Japan's modernisation.

TRADITIONAL IDEAS IN JAPAN

In an attempt to explain the so-called 'traditional ideas' in Japan, Hendry (2003:39) mentioned the correlation between Confucian principles and Japanese society. According to him, it is related to 'the indigenous family system where men were superior to women, who were expected to attend to [man's] every need'. This idea still encourages Japanese women to stay home, do the housework and care for their families, while the men are considered as the financial supporters (Shinotsuka 1995; Morley 1999; Hendry 2003). Since Japanese society is based on this notion, women's work patterns are unique when compared to those of women in Western industrial countries. A vast majority of Japanese women want to stay at home after getting married because they believe that being mothers and wives is their responsibility. Moreover, most husbands still want their wives to adhere to this traditional idea (Hendry 2003). This generates gender inequality at the workplace and home.

GENDER INEQUALITY IN JAPAN

Gender issues have become a core concern in sustaining the development of Japan. The government is now making attempts to minimise the gender gap. I will not discuss the reasons for the continued existence of gender inequality and why the government takes this issue so seriously.

The birth rate in Japan has been declining sharply over the last decade (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). The total fertility rate (TFR) was 3.60 in 1950 and 1.75 in 1980, and the birth rate was 1.36 in 2000 (IPSS 2004). By comparison, the birth rate in America was 3.02 in 1950 and 1.84 in 1980; this figure increased to 2.13 in 2000. Therefore, the Japanese government is extremely concerned about arresting and reversing the declining birth rate (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). This is because it recognises that a declining birth rate will lead to labour shortages, which will weaken national economic activities (Morley 1999; Yim 2000). Apart from the declining birth rate, which is a major problem, it is the problem of population ageing that is compelling the government to seriously consider the declining birth rate (Osawa 2000). Therefore, the introduction of the concept of gender equality will have political implications (Morley 1999). The government believes that women's participation in the workforce is essential to ensure a sufficient amount of labour. Therefore, the government has introduced new laws to overcome demographic concerns. However, the traditional idea embedded in the minds of the Japanese people extends beyond the scope and control of such laws. Even the government sustains a tax system that accelerates the marginalisation of women from the workforce.

Now, let us consider the trend of women's participation in the workforce.
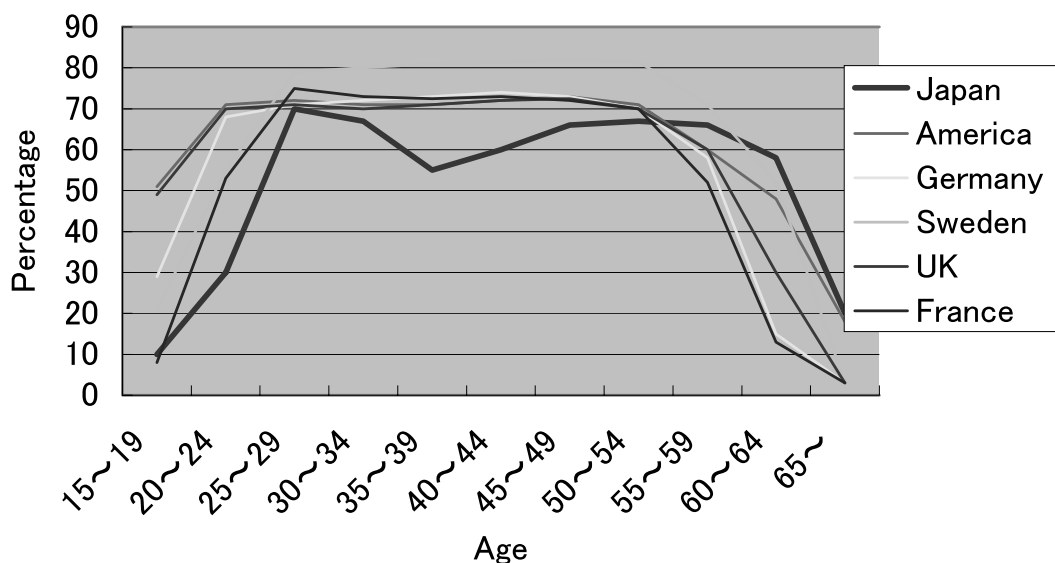
Graph 1: International comparison of female labour participation rates
Note: Data on Japan, America and Germany were collected in 2000; that on Sweden, the UK and France were collected in 1997.
Source: Sorifu Danjo Kyodo Sankaku-shitsu 2000, Figure 5 (cited in Sugimoto 2003, p.155)

Graph 1 shows an M-shaped curve in the women's participation in the workforce, according to age. This trend reflects the traditional idea of women as being mothers and wives. Thus, women prefer to work until they get married, and they return to the workforce as part-time workers when their children enter school or university (Shinotsuka 1995; Morley 1999; Hendry 2003; Sugimoto 2003). However, the situation differs in other developed countries. In America, for instance, this curve was the same for men and women in the 1970s. Thus, unlike their Japanese counterparts, American women do not have to quit their jobs for reasons of marriage or childbirth (Shinotsuka 1995). Inglehart and Norris (2003:29) stated that 'in postindustrial societies, gender roles have increasingly converged because of a structural revolution in the paid labour force, in educational opportunities for women and in the characteristics of modern families'. However, the trend represented by the M-shaped curve has not changed for a long time in the case of Japan (Shinotsuka 1995; Gender Equality Bureau 2007:59).

According to Morley (1999), Japanese women are well educated compared to their counterparts in other countries. However, the woman's position at work has not changed much, even with higher education. Japanese companies recruit women mainly for secretarial positions. Their duties involve serving tea, making photocopies, sending faxes and answering phone calls; thus, a woman is often referred to as an 'office lady' [OL] (Sugimoto 2003:157). Although the educational level of women is almost the same as that of men, the number of OLs has not decreased. For instance, on average, the OLs in 1970 comprised those who were only high school graduates or had a lower level of education; however, in

1980, on average, OLs comprised four-year university graduates (Smith 1995:106). This trend is very different to that observed in Western countries. Although Mathews (2003) argued that many Japanese women are not career oriented, it should be noted that the Japanese social structure does not allow them to be so, owing to the traditional ideas ingrained in the minds of both men and women. Companies do not want to hire women as 'all-round' employees who train to be future managers because they believe that women quit their jobs after marriage or childbirth, according to what is traditionally expected of them. In fact, companies retain women in secretarial positions even if they do not get married and continue working. Further, companies have even forced women to resign because women are not expected to assume any responsibility beyond that of an OL. This is why Japan shows an unusual M-shaped curve. Moreover, it is difficult to overcome gender issues in Japan merely with women's involvement in the workplace.

The government tax system has encouraged the traditional structure: women as mothers and wives and men as breadwinners. If the wife stays at home or does not earn over 1,030,000 yen per year, which is well below the living wages in Japan, her husband can obtain a full tax deduction of 380,000 yen, and she can receive pension and medical insurance (Bandou 2004:85). This financial support is significant for family budgeting (Morley 1999; Bandou 2004). Although the government can consider women's reproductive role within the tax policy, as this is beneficial for women who want to stay at home and tend to their children and husbands, the tax system plays a strong role in restricting women to their homes (Shinotsuka 1995; Morley 1999; Bandou 2004). Sugimoto (2003) argued that the government's tax policy merely allows women to work casually or on a part-time basis. Therefore, women's wages have been kept low by the tax system.

Morley (1999:69) stated that 'despite gendered expectations and role division, Japan remains heavily dependent on women's labour outside the home'. Indeed, over 50% of the paid workforce is occupied by married women; thus, female employees play an essential role in the Japanese economy (Sugimoto 2003:40). Additionally, married women resume work after their children start attending school because they have more free time at this point (Morley 1999). However, a vast majority of women are only able to find jobs that are defined as part-time, even though they work full-time hours (Morley 1999; Sugimoto 2003; Gender Equality Bureau 2007). These part-time employees endure unjust conditions. For instance, they are not considered for welfare services such as pensions, sick leave or semi-annual bonuses (Sugimoto 2003). Further, these women are not able to earn the required amount of living wages (Morley 1999). Therefore, many married women are limited in their economic power.

In order to continue along the path to potential managerial positions and economic power, Japanese women should either not marry or not have children. The working environment is unfair to women who are employed in what the Japanese term as 'career track' (Sugimoto 2003). According to the Labour Ministry report in 1990, 90% of the companies who responded to the survey stated that women represent less than 1% of their managers (Smith 1995:106). In addition, 73% of female managers at or above the position of 'section head' have not borne children (Sugimoto 2003:157). Since the practice of

forcing women to quit after marriage has been common since the pre-war years (Morley 1999:73), it has led to an increase in the number of single people and childless couples (Hendry 2003). According to Sugimoto (2003:157), '[w]hen women return to the workforce after a long break, they are far behind men in the same age bracket with regard to acquired skill'. Thus, there has been an increase in the number of women who only want to concentrate on their careers, without considering marriage and children. Statistics have revealed that companies consider investing in male workers to be more profitable than investing in married women, as male workers will continuously contribute to the company (Sugimoto 2003). Thus, women who wish to have careers should be willing to work continuously. Consequently, an increasing number of women are opting for the 'career pathway'. Industry and business practices clearly reflect societal attitudes. If the working conditions for women are to improve, what will cause the change? At first, will it be society's attitude or governmental policies? This question leads us to the heart of this issue in Japan because the traditional attitudes of society are much stronger than government policy. Now, we will analyse the government response.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES

In order to deal with the declining birth rate and the increasing demand for female workers, the government has passed new laws. In this section, some typical gender equality laws in Japan will be mentioned. One is the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), which was brought into effect in 1986, and another is the Childcare Leave Law of 1992. Although the EEOL has some positive aspects, it has still not overcome the traditional concept to achieve gender equality. The Childcare Leave Law also prescribes a new aspect of male involvement to solve gender inequality and the birth rate issue.

EEOL stipulates that companies should not discriminate against women in the workplace and that women should be treated on par with men during recruiting, hiring, placement and promotion (Suzuki 1996). However, EEOL has merely compelled workers to treat men and women similarly with respect to advertising and the initial pay while recruiting new employees (Hendry 2003). Shinotsuka (1995) argued that although the law aimed at providing women with the same working opportunities as men, a majority of women did not want the pattern of lifetime employment followed by men. Since women believe in the traditional idea of being wives and mothers, they prefer raising their children themselves instead of relying on babysitters (Morley 1999). Moreover, socially, women are not expected to perform beyond the traditional roles.

Hence, women's ideal working pattern is that of securing jobs after graduating from college or university and working until marriage. After their children grow up, they seek employment again. Therefore, not many women can derive advantages from EEOL (Shinotsuka 1995) because they do not want to be like men. Thus, the policy-makers should have considered the aspect that not all women will want to follow the male working pattern, given the dominant traditional gender division. This is as much a cultural issue as it is an economic one. Moreover, this law disregards women's needs because its comprehension of equality is that women should be like men: earn money for the family and sacrifice spending

time with the family. As expected, this law did not have a strong impact on curbing the declining birth rate. Thus, the government established a second law – the Childcare Leave Law – to encourage male parents' participation at home, so that women can pursue their careers and ensure childcare as well.

In April 1992, the Diet passed the Childcare Leave Law, granting either parent the option of one year's leave without pay and the guarantee of returning to the same job at the same level (Morley 1999). However, the shortcoming of this law is that there are no penalties for violators; in this sense, it is similar to the EEOL (Morley 1999; Sugimoto 2003). A Japanese government survey in 1999 indicated that the average time that fathers spend with their children was only 17 minutes a day (Yim 2000:13). Therefore, the government opined that if fathers spend more time for childcare, their wives can work outside the home and contribute to enhancing national economic activities. Actually, the government was merely shifting the blame of gender issues to men; however, it is not only the male parents' influence that causes gender issues. It was observed that only 0.33% of fathers took childcare leave in 2002 (Gender Equality Bureau 2004:72).

Despite this policy being enacted by the law, whether men actually take the leave still depends on the 'family-friendly' atmosphere of the workplace (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). The negative side to men taking childcare leave is that, in some cases, they are harassed by their bosses and/or colleagues. In fact, in one case, a man was transferred to China almost immediately upon his return to work from childcare leave, owing to embarrassment (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). This is not an isolated case. It is evidently difficult for men to take parental leave under the traditional social structure because taking leave of absence is considered as a sign of weakness in men. Thus, the notion of fathers taking childcare leave is not widely accepted among men because the traditional idea is strongly ingrained in their minds. This aspect can be understood by examining the concept of Japanese masculinity.

MASCULINITY IN JAPANESE MALES

According to Stockwin (*Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan*, 2003:xiv), '[e]mbedded in the Western consciousness of Japanese society is the idea that Japan is highly male-dominated'. Indeed, the Japanese parliament was 90% male dominated in 2001 (Sugimoto 2003:159). The percentage of female business managers at the directorial level or above was only 0.3% (Jojo gaisha yakuin doko chosa, cited in Sugimoto 2003:159); at the department head level, this proportion was 2.2%, and at the level of section head, it was merely 4.0% (The Basic Survey on Wage Structure of the Ministry of Labor, cited in Sugimoto 2003:159). Thus, it is appropriate to acknowledge that Japan is a highly male-dominated society. However, it is doubtful that men alone can obtain social benefits by merely considering the male domination in the formal arena. Actually, an increasing number of men in Japan are silently seeking help in order to be released from the traditional concept as breadwinners. Although it is the men who widely dominate the formal arenas such as policy making and business situations, it is also important to consider the concept of masculinity among men; this is because men who lose their status as being 'masculine' can lose confidence in themselves.

Mathews (2003:109) stated that it is difficult to understand masculinity in Japan as there are many forms of masculinity; however, 'both Western and Japanese scholars have "attempted to generalize Japanese society on the basis of observations of its male elite sector"' (Sugimoto, cited in Roberson and Suzuki 2003:9). Most Japanese men still believe that their primary familial role is to provide economic support; therefore, they do not pay too much attention to their responsibility of participating in childcare (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). Many Japanese fathers ensure their masculinity at home and indulge less in housework because they are overworked at their jobs (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). However, men also face difficulties in adapting their daily lifestyles to suit this concept of masculinity. The traditional Japanese 'salaryman' still works longer hours than his counterparts in other developed countries. Therefore, these people endanger their health and are often separated from their families due to transfers (Morley 1999).

Consequently, Japanese fathers spend fewer hours with their children than do their counterparts in other countries. According to a 1994 survey, Japanese fathers spend an average of 3.8 hours per day with their children who are aged three or younger. This number is significantly less than that in America (5.35 hours), the UK (6.45 hours) and Korea (4.12 hours) (Japan Association for Women's Education cited in Ishii-Kuntz 2003:11). Mathews (2003:109) stated that the traditional gender division has a negative effect on women; however, fathers who wish to spend more time for childcare and housework also face many obstacles because of fixed traditional ideas (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). Despite this, it can be stated that Japanese men who comply with the concept of masculinity work hard to be breadwinners and sacrifice their family time. This makes them comfortable as they believe that they are doing the right thing as men. However, men who are a finding new masculinity concept struggle with between two masculinities ideas.

Although most men still believe that taking care of children is a woman's responsibility, some men believe this to be representative of a father's masculinity as well. Nevertheless, most Japanese men believe that indulging in childcare is against the concept of masculinity. Thus, the different masculinities are represented by men who believe that childcare is a woman's responsibility and those who believe that it is a man's responsibility as well. Therefore, it can be said that the concept of masculinity differs even within Japanese society. Actually, each culture has its own perceptions of being a man or a woman (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). According to Conell (1995, cited in Roberson 2003:127), although the traditional conception of Japanese men promotes only one image of masculinity, different Japanese men have different outlooks.

With respect to the concept of masculinity, it is understandable why Japanese fathers do not take childcare leave and companies do not allow male employees to take it, albeit unofficially. Salarymen who are willing to indulge in childcare are believed to have failed in adhering to the traditional definition of masculinity in Japan. However, these men actually follow their own concepts of masculinity in executing their roles as fathers. These men refuse to conform to the ideal expectations of the traditional concept of masculinity in Japan (Ishii-Kuntz 2003).

Another factor that is indicative of the acute crisis of Japanese men is the suicide rate. Although suicide is one of the major causes of mortality in any society, the suicide rate in Japan is higher than that in other countries, and it has been increasing steadily since 2001 (Desapriya and Iwase 2003). A study conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare reveals that the suicide rate of middle-aged men (43-53 years) was five times higher than that of women. Desapriya and Iwase (2003) claimed that there is a correlation between the suicide rate and unemployment due to recession. Men who lose their jobs believe that they have lost their masculinity as well. Thus, it is possible that they take their status of being unemployed very seriously and thus commit suicide.

The World Health Organization (WHO) published a report on the suicide rate in 2004. According to the report (WHO 2004), the male suicide rate in Japan was the highest among the developed nations. In the 1999 survey, Japan ranked 23rd, and in the 2004 survey, it ranked 10th. It proves the correlation between the traditional idea and the negative consequences it has for men. Thus, economic recession can damage men's position as breadwinners.

Another relevant factor is that there is a big difference between the male and female life expectancy in Japan. According to a WHO report (2006), the life expectancy of a male is 79 years, while that of a female is 86 years. In most third world patriarchal countries, the female life expectancy is shorter than that of the male because women do not have the same access to health, food and education due to hierarchy. Thus, Japan is a unique case. According to this data, men are also victims of gender division. Moreover, even economic development could not provide a solution to the structural gender issue. Considering the above, although it can hardly be said that Japanese males obtain social benefits, in formal situation such as policy making, male domination is still strong.

It can be strongly argued that the traditional male lifestyle contributes significantly to the discrepancy. It can be also said, therefore, that men also suffer as a result of the concept of masculinity in Japan. Further, they have limited choices, particularly if their attitudes differ from the traditional idea of men.

DO TRADITIONAL IDEAS IMPEDE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT IN JAPAN?

As mentioned above, these traditional ideas are still dominant among Japanese people, despite the economic advancement made since World War II. It seems that traditional ideas about the responsibilities of men and women hamper gender equality in Japan, leading to a declining birth rate. However, it is doubtful whether the declining birth rate is entirely the result of these traditional beliefs. All societies, including industrialised ones, have their own values (Webster 1990; Werline 2003). Thus, the factor that chiefly contributes to gender issues is misdirected government policies because these policies disregard the social structure.

The most recent law established for preventing a decline in the birth rate is the Childcare Leave Law. Nevertheless, the government is shifting the blame of the declining birth rate to fathers. Since the gov-

ernment believes that male parents' participation in the household can solve this problem, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare prepared an advertisement with this controversial slogan, 'A man who does not raise his children cannot be called a father' (Ishii-Kuntz 2003:200). The advertisement suggests that looking after children is a crucial masculine behaviour, much like providing finances for the family. However, the government has a misunderstanding here, at a very fundamental level. The declining birth rate is not caused merely by men's low rate of participation at home. There are discriminations against women at the workplace, and even EEOL has been enacted since only 1986. It is difficult for women to manage both their children and their careers. Thus, providing satisfactory day care would be more effective for working women. In addition, the government should build a comfortable working environment for both men and women by following the above laws. Firstly, the childcare leave granted by the government, with payment and penalties for violators, can have a strong impact on the population issues.

Yim (2000) disagreed with the idea that women staying at home and having more children is a plausible solution to the declining birth rate. Further, Yim (2000) argued that the persistent gender roles contribute to the low birth rate. The Japanese social structure does not allow women to cope with being wives, mothers and career women at the same time, because companies want them to choose between having a career or children. Consequently, a low birth rate is explained by women choosing to pursue a career instead of becoming mothers (Yim 2000). These fixed ideas in the Japanese society need to be modified for both men and women through viable government policies. This is because 'socially, as men, they are expected to remain strong and autonomous and, if they need help, they should seek it privately' (Suzuki 2003:104).

However, it is true that many women choose to do secretarial work. Hendry (2003:178) stated that 'some women throw caution to the wind and, if offered, accept the management track anyway, but then, they also experience the same pressure as men with respect to putting in long hours and going drinking after work'. It can be said that women even hope to work as 'all-round' employees, as long as companies do not marginalise women's roles as merely OL workers. Therefore, if they marry, women sacrifice their careers rather than these men (Hendry 2003).

Of course, there are women who desire to pursue their careers seriously, or those who simply work the same long hours as men do; these women tend to make decisions not to have any children (Hendry 2003). Either it is their choice or they are forced to choose between having children and a career. According to Hendry (2003:34-35), 'there is apparently an increase both in the number of people who choose not to marry at all and those who decide, though married, not to have children'. One reason why an increasing number of women decide not to have children is that when they return to the workforce after a long absence, they find a significant gap between the skills and experience of their male colleagues and their own (Sugimoto 2003).

All the above factors contribute to the declining birth rate because a comfortable working environment

which considers women's reproductive role and childbirth leave has not practically evolved as yet. Thus, the falling birth rate is a silent resistance from women against companies' and policy-makers[1] ignorance of women's roles as mothers and wives. In addition, a high suicide rate among men signifies an image of social inequality. If the government continues to disregard the population concerns, it will lead to 'unanticipated long-term consequences' (Ono 2003:284), particularly in economic activities such as importing labour.

SOLUTION TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY

The policies of the Japanese government do not always have a positive influence on both men and women. One reason can be that these policies lack the consideration of embedded social beliefs. According to Moser (1993:39), 'historically, top-down state intervention alone has not removed any of the persistent causes of gender inequality within society'. Gender issues require more sensible considerations.

Actually, Japanese women did not benefit much from postwar modernisation. Economic development cannot assure peoples' quality of life (Kanai 1996) and gender equality. According to the Human Development Report 2007/2008 (UNDP 2007:330), Japan was ranked 54th from among 93 countries in the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM).GEM is an index measuring gender inequality in three areas: economic participation and decision-making, political participation and decision-making, and power over economic resource (UNDP 2007:336). For reference, Norway ranked number 1 and America ranked number 15. Although economic development fulfils the practical needs of all people in Japan, it is doubtful whether the strategic needs have been fulfilled. Furthermore, economic advancement triggers emphasis on gender inequality, which limits the choices of both men and women and causes a decline in the birth rate. Men have to assume the responsibility of the main financial providers in their families, while women have to take care of the children and housework, because men's contribution to the astonishing post-war development influenced the gender role division.

Morley (1999:5) deemed that 'Japan may be unique among Asian countries in being modern and Westernised on the surface and very traditional beneath that veneer'. Lunsing (2001) symbolizes this by stating that the feminist movement in the 1970s in Japan was followed by the women's liberation movement in America. Sinotsuka (1995) argued that there exists a traditional concept that women feel equity conscience if they ask baby sitters to look after their children; therefore, the feminism movement had only negative consequences. Thus, to overcome gender issues and the birth rate concern, it is necessary to frame policies that conform to the Japanese social style: women work after they graduate until they get married and bear children; when their children start attending school, women resume working. Thus, new policies eliminate women's concerns regarding Japanese women's working circle. Alternatively, the empowerment of women can ensure women's status as being equal to that of men.

In addition, the development approach of empowerment has highlighted women's challenging of patri-

archal and political-economic inequalities since the late 1980s (Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2002). This empowerment approach can be applied as a solution to the issue of gender inequality in Japan. This is because, this approach 'seeks to identify power less in terms of domination over others and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength' (Moser 1993:74). This aspect is extremely important for Japanese women and even some men. According to Morley (1999), a typical Japanese person believes that individualism implies selfishness and antisocial behaviour. Moreover, as a culture, the Japanese prioritise group harmony rather than other conventions, in order to maintain traditionalism (Morley 1999). These concepts limit women's self-reliance. In the case of Japan, it is important for women to cope with being mothers and wives like men who can choose between being fathers and workers. In order to empower Japanese women, firstly, society should make them aware that they can have equal opportunities. They should not choose an option, citing destiny as the reason. The government should establish formal organisations that encourage women's self-reliance. Further, the government can use the media to advertise equal rights. However, the government should establish organisations for men as well. Otherwise, the suicide rate will continue to rise.

CONCLUSION

It is observed that Japanese society has several dominant themes. Its foundation is traditional. It has achieved remarkable modernisation since World War II. However, the process of modernisation has been considerably stagnant due to the gender equality dilemma. Japan is now in the process of addressing this dilemma. In Japanese society, women are most often limited in their choices, in particular at the workplace; it is not always easy for them to move beyond their roles of being mothers and wives. The traditional role and social inequality has led to a decline in the birth rate. A low birth rate will result in an inadequate future labour force. Likewise, men are also negatively affected by their traditional roles of being breadwinners. They have to work longer hours and sacrifice the time they could spend with their children. They are also unlikely to ask for help because, according to the traditional concept of masculinity, this is a sign of weakness. Currently, the high suicide rate among middle-aged men reveals that it is a serious concern in Japan. Although the government has made attempts to solve these issues with policies, as long as there is the fixed traditional concept, achieving gender equality appears to be rather difficult. Thus, instead of government-level solutions, it is necessary to adopt the empowering approach. Both men and women at community level can minimise inequality as they are empowered to choose their own paths without struggling with traditional concepts. In addition, peoples' attitudes are gradually changing; therefore, it will be interesting to observe how it affects the younger generation. They might break from the traditional ideas to bring about equality.

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