Teleworking System: A new working system in Japan as a solution to encourage women's participation in economic sectors

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Abstract. Japan’s declining population has led to the reduction of human and economic productivity. A solution for this problem is to encourage more women to participate within economic sectors by creating regulations that support them. Currently, women are faced with numerous issues that hinder their ability to maintain both work and domestic duties; these issues include long working hours, short maternity leave, and limited children day cares. As a result, the Japanese government has issued several policies to resolve such problems. One solution is by introducing a new working system called the teleworking system. The teleworking system enables people to work outside of the office by using ICT. Research surrounding this system describes and analyzes data involving women participation in the economic sector. The data is collected through interviews with respondents in Tokyo. The approach of this research adopts quantitative and qualitative observations through its analytical and comparative descriptive method.

1. Women empowerment policy in Japan

A growing concern for Japan is its population size, which has been declining since 2006. Prospects estimate that Japan’s population will decrease from 127 million to 87 million by 2060. Japan’s fertility rate is 1.25, below 2.1 which is the rate required to maintain population size. These low numbers have led to a large elderly population, with less helpers available to provide care. The ratio between the productive age population and retirees is projected to fall from 5:2 in 2010 to 3:2 in 2040. This may lead to scarcity in funds needed to pay for social safety net programs. The combination of low birth rates, tight immigration policies, and large elderly population encourages policy makers to create significant policies.

Some economists argue that women’s participation in the labor force can significantly increase fertility rates in Japan. This is supported by several studies done by UNDP (2016) taken place in Sweden and Denmark, where results have displayed a positive correlation between participation in workplace and birth rates. In addition, higher birth rates have been expected to reduce the cost of elderly care.

In Japan, demographic surveys show that declining population is partly because of Japanese women’s decision to postpone marriage or forget marriage altogether. The average age for Japanese women to get married is 29 years old, while almost a third of these women decide not to get married until their early 30s. This is most prominent in urban areas. In comparison, the median age for females to get married in the United States is 26.5 years old. Studies show that this phenomenon is due to the stereotype
of the housewife; the wife is required to stay home all day to take care of the children and parents while their husband works all day. Policies that help women balance between families and more successful careers are the key to success in increasing populations and bringing positive economic benefits.

Historically, the roles of Japanese men and women have changed due to the country’s social shift, from a matrilineal system to a patrilineal system. This became fully realized in the Edo period (1603 ~ 1868) from the rising influence of Confucianism. Confucianism emphasizes the "men outside" and "women inside" concept as well as sanju no dotoku, which means “a woman should in youth obey her father, in maturity her husband, and in old age her son”. Equality between men and women began in the Meiji period where the government sought to adopt western ideas concerning a formal education system between men and women. In 1986, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was issued to prevent discrimination against women.

There are several indicators used to evaluate social development from a gender perspective. One example is the Human Development Index (HDI). According to the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) 2016 Human Development Report, the HDI is a summary measure for assessing progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living. A long and healthy life is measured by life expectancy at birth; knowledge level is measured by the average number of years that people aged 25 years and older receive education; and access to learning and knowledge by expected years of schooling for children of school-entry age, which is the total number of years of schooling a child of school-entry age can expect to receive if prevailing patterns of age-specific enrolment rates stay the same throughout the child's life. The standard of living is measured by Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, expressed in constant 2011 international dollars and converted using purchasing power parity (PPP) conversion rates.

Figure 1. Human Development Index 2014 [3]

In the chart above, Japan's HDI of 89.06 is well above the world average’ HDI (71.05). This high number distinguishes Japan as a developed nation.

Elected in December 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made it the government’s priority to boost Japan's economic growth and to eliminate the deflation prevalent in Japan for many years. Abe announced an ambitious economic reform program, known as Abenomics, to stimulate economic growth. The strategy focuses on three key economic policy tools, or "arrows", including monetary expansionary policies, fiscal stimulus, and structural reforms. Abe has announced that a key component of the "third arrow," structural reform, will focus on "womenomics". This concept enhances economic growth through reforms that encourage women's participation and advancement in the Japanese workforce. Abe, in 2013’s Wall Street Journal, has argued that to realize better economic conditions, Japan need to optimize the human resources that had been overlooked. In addition, Abe has continued
to stress the importance of women empowerment in the workforce through his speeches during the UN
General Assembly in September 2013 and the World Economic Forum in January 2014.

Originally coined by Kathy Matsui in 1999, womenomics is a concept of economic thinking that
focuses on women's empowerment efforts. Its aim is to provide women with equal access in the
economic sector and to generate economic benefits and social progress. Since 2013, Abe's government
has promised to promote this policy and to create a new society where all women can "shine" in Japan
(subete no josei ga kagayaku nihon e). While Abe admits that the concept, itself, is not new, his use of
it is to create a new Japan.

One breakthrough for the Japanese government is the introduction of a new working system called
teleworking. It allows employees to work from outside the office using electronic devices. Japanese
companies are known for their rigid work rules, where every employee is required to be present at the
office during work hours. Many companies determine promotion based on the length of their employees’
work hours. Workers in Japan are known for having the longest work hours in the world. Tiredness due
to crowded public transportation in the morning and life imbalance due to long working hours are key
factors for Japan’s high suicide rates.

The teleworking system is an effective solution to deal with the era of declining birth rates and
increasing elderly population; it balances time for work and family, improves business effectiveness and
customer satisfaction, ensures business sustainability in times of emergency, and reduces the
environmental burden and operational costs of the company. Short term prospects indicate that the
teleworking system will reduce the Tokyo’s density during Tokyo Olympics in 2020. The new work
model is also expected to increase the likelihood of career women getting married and having children,
since there is less worry for them to lose their jobs. This effort is expected to increase the birth rate of
the population and encourage the participation of women to move the country's economy.

2. Interview Result
In the period August-October 2017, I interviewed 14 female workers in Tokyo. The result is presented
in the following:

| Question         | Answer                  |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Age           | 30 ~ 40 : 4 people      |
|                  | > 50 : 2 people         |
|                  | <30 : 2 people          |
|                  | 40 ~ 50 : 6 people      |
| 2. Education     | Bachelor’s degree : 11 people |
|                  | Master’s degree : 2 people |
|                  | No answer : 1 people    |
| 3. Position      | Staff : 8 people        |
|                  | Other : 5 people        |
|                  | No answer : 1 people    |
| 4. Status        | Married with children : 9 people |
|                  | Not married : 5 people  |
| 5. Length of work| <5 : 10 people           |
|                  | 5 ~ 10 years : 3 people |
|                  | 10 ~ 15 years : 1 person |
6. Family’s support
   A. No support : 3 people
   B. Small support : 4 people
   C. Support : 4 people
   D. Strongly support : 2 people
   E. No answer : 1 person

7. Parent’s support
   A. No support : 2 people
   B. Small support : 1 person
   C. Support : 4 people
   D. Strongly support : 2 people
   E. No answer : 5 people

8. Number of children
   2 children : 7 people
   3 children : 1 person

9. Age
   10 ~ 15 years old : 7 people
   5 ~ 10 years old : 1 person

10. During working hours where is child taken care?
    Day care : 4 people
    School : 4 people

11. Superiors and coworkers’ support
    A. No support : 3 people
    B. Small : 1 person
    C. Support : 7 people
    D. Strongly support : 1 person
    E. No answer : 2 people

12. After married do you continue working?
    A. Yes : 9 people
    B. No answer : 5 people

13. Expectations to government
    A. Reduced working hour : 7 people
    B. Provide daycare around the office : 7 people
    C. Increase number of maternity leave : 11 people
    D. Others : 3 people

14. Opinion against “working at home”
    A. Agree : 11 people
    B. Disagree : 2 people
    C. No answer : 1 person

15. Expectation upon maternity leave
    5 months : 6 people
    1 ~ 2 years : 8 people

16. Do you agree with maternity leave from office?
    Agree : 7 people
    Disagree : 2 people

3. Analysis
The majority of respondents are female workers with children. They began their careers since graduating from university. While they work, domestic tasks are usually done by supporting husbands and children. Sometimes, family relatives and parents provide support in taking care of the female workers’ children. In the workplace, female workers are also supported by co-workers so that they can balance between family and job. A majority of female workers leave their children in daycare or school while they are at work. However, an enduring problem is the limited number of daycares, especially those within range of their workplace.

Unmarried women said that they will continue their work after they get married and have children. While they worry about taking care of their children, they decide to continue their career in order to be financially stable. The results of this interview show that modern Japanese women already have an advanced view of education and careers. Modern Japanese women no longer share the Confucianism ideology of “man outside” and “women inside” nor the sanju no dotoku concept that puts women as the only person responsible for taking care of the household; rather, they decide to pursue opportunities outside of performing domestic tasks. The principle of equality in Meiji era and The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) has encouraged women to develop their education and to actively participate in economic sectors.

The Human Development Index (HDI), one of the tools used to measure human quality in a country, has labelled Japan as a highly developed nation. One of the indicators of HDI is knowledge level. It is measured by average years of education among the adult population, and access to learning and knowledge by expected years of schooling for children of school-entry age. As a highly developed country, average years of education in Japan is high. The data above shows that all of the respondents graduated from university. The prospect of higher education provides these female workers the opportunity to pursue careers within the economic sector.

However, there are many problems that female workers with children must endure. These include factors regarding to children daycare, working hours, and maternity leave. A majority of these workers want the government to increase the number of children daycares and provide it near the work offices. They also want Japanese government to create a regulation regarding the flexibility of working hours as well as increasing maternity leave to be between two to five years.

4. Conclusion
Prime Minister Abe’s approach to empowering Japanese women in economic sectors is almost achieved, as shown from the conditions mentioned above. The majority of female workers have completed high education and contain passion to develop their career. They are also supported by family and co-workers to maintain office and domestic tasks. However, there are still several problems faced by Japanese female workers that need to be solved by the government. These issues include limited number of children day care, long working hours, and short maternity leaves. One of the solutions is to implement the teleworking system. This system allows employees to work from outside the office by using electronic devices. This system is projected to be effective in increasing the likelihood of single female workers getting married and having children without worrying about losing their careers and handling domestic duties. This effort is expected to increase the birth rate of the population and encourage the participation of women to improve the country's economy.

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