

The Slow Decline of the Male-breadwinner Family Model in Contemporary Japan and Its Ramifications for Men's Lives

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The strength of a “gender triad” consisting of company employees, housewives, and corporations that formed during the nation’s years of high economic growth has been partly responsible for Japan’s lateness in shifting from the male-breadwinner family model to the dual-earning model. However, today, as the cost-benefit balance of the male-breadwinner family model worsens, a rise in the employment continuation rate among women is observed in various forms of statistical data. In this paper, I use an interview survey of 26 men and women that was conducted in two large enterprises in 2017 to consider the significance of the slow decline of the male-breadwinner family model, as indicated by macro data, for the way Japanese men work and live, in comparison with the United States and Sweden. The survey data suggest that the likelihood of women continuing employment has increased compared to before. Companies have taken various measures to support work-family balance, resulting in a rise in the number of women who continue employment by actually using these support systems; ultimately, inspired by the role models in their workplace, the number of women who commit to continuing employment has also increased. As a result, there are now not a few men and women who plan their lives based on the assumption that both will continue working. Moreover, according to the survey data, the possibility that more men will participate in family life can be expected, as is the case in Sweden, as the model’s conversion takes place; however, the data also suggest the danger that more men will withdraw from family life, as is the case observed among some men in the United States. Japanese men now stand at a crossroads that could lead to two completely opposite directions.

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I. Introduction

In many Western countries, male-breadwinner families are being replaced by dual-earning families. However, the change in the family model is taking place slowly, if at all, in Japan. It has been pointed out that this delay in the shift is responsible for various social problems in Japanese society, such as an increase

in the number of people who remain unmarried and a decrease in the number of children. In this paper, I will start with an overview of family change in the United States and Sweden, two of the earliest examples of the dual-earning model penetrating into society, with the aim of later making a comparison with Japan. I will then discuss the reasons why the shift to the dual-earning model is lagging in Japan. Next, I will examine early signs of transformation in Japanese families in order to identify which part of the model is changing, how, and why. Finally, I will consider the significance of the model's tentative transition for the way Japanese men work and live.

II. Family change in the United States and Sweden

Following the Second World War, industrialization and economic development in Western countries produced benefits that spread throughout society. Many women were freed from wage labor and became full-time housewives, and the male-breadwinner family model became commonplace. However, beginning in the 1970s, the industrial structure began to change from being manufacturing-based to service-based, and consequently, demand for low-skilled, relatively homogeneous male laborers declined dramatically in the manufacturing sector. As male employment destabilized and wages fell, the difficulty and risk of supporting a family with only the man working grew. On the other hand, the shift from manual labor to office work and interpersonal services increased demand for female workers. Against this backdrop of major social and economic change, an environment in which both men and women work gradually took shape. However, the dual-earning model did not spread evenly to all developed countries. The shift in models occurred most quickly in the United States and Sweden. Key factors were the socialization of childcare, followed by men's participation in family life.

For full-time housewives to enter the workforce, there had to be someone who would take over housework and child-rearing on their behalf; particularly important were child-rearing duties that could not be put off and housework that concerned child-rearing. Relatively speaking, the U.S. and Sweden are countries that have been successful at socializing childcare. However, the ways they went about doing this were completely different.

As indicated by the analysis of postindustrial economies presented by Esping-Andersen (1999), Sweden is progressing on a path of social democracy that maintains high welfare and high tax and social security burdens. Compared to other Western countries, the male-breadwinner family model was relatively weak from the beginning and was swept away in the 1970s as women's participation in the labor force progressed (Sainsbury 1996). Public services were provided for childcare and elderly nursing care, and many of the women who were released from care work in the home were absorbed into the public sector as care workers. As a result, occupational gender segregation took place with men, many of whom were employed in the private sector, and it has been pointed out that although women had a high participation rate in the workforce, the percentage of women in management positions was not as high (Tsutsui 2015). Additionally, a government-led childcare leave system was established, in part due to a relatively strong tendency toward emphasizing infant care by parents. One of the characteristics of the Swedish childcare leave system is that it provides income compensation not only to mothers, but also to fathers.¹ In fact, in addition to the socialization of childcare, Sweden is among the most advanced countries in terms of male participation in family life. According to Takahashi (2016), who analyzed data from the "2015 Comparative International Awareness Survey on Societies with Declining Birth Rate," respondents in the 20 to 49 age group who indicated that the statement "wives and husbands handle child-rearing equally" best describes their own thinking was 94% for both men and women in Sweden. This figure is much higher than those of Japan (men 37%, women 30%), France (men 51%, women 50%), and the United Kingdom (men 68%, women 62%).

In the United States, where the stress is placed on market mechanisms, public support for childcare such as childcare leave systems and public nursery schools is limited. The socialization of childcare became

possible when a large low-wage workforce, primarily composed of immigrants, provided care work through the market. In addition, because the external labor market is well developed in the U.S., women had many opportunities to leave the labor market to give birth or raise children and then return to the market by taking another job. The female employment rate in the U.S. rose markedly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. As a result, the share of households with a full-time housewife among all households fell conspicuously from roughly two-thirds in 1950 to 28% in 1980 (Reskin and Padavic 1994). Moreover, as more and more women joined the American workforce, the percentage of women in management positions also rose considerably. This percentage, which stood at just 18.5% in 1970, reached 35.6% in 1985 (Kurosawa 2011). However, in the United States, it is difficult for low-wage earners to pay expensive childcare costs in order to work, and thus the entrenchment of social class disparities has become a problem.

In Sweden, male participation in family life increased with the socialization of childcare. However, the situation is slightly different in the United States. This is because, despite the fact that, like Sweden, the number of men who participate in family life undoubtedly increased—in other words, those who share the responsibility for maintaining the family’s livelihood as well as housework and child-rearing duties with their wife expanded—as the share of households with a full-time housewife decreased, the number of men who opt for independence over commitment to their families also increased. Bernard (1983) reports that, even from the 1960s, there were men who worked hard to achieve “success” as livelihood providers on the one hand, but also the number of men who rejected this kind of “success” and abandoned their families gradually increased on the other. This trend was accelerated when traditionally male jobs in the manufacturing sector decreased, male employment became destabilized, and wages fell, and it became more difficult for a man alone to fulfill his responsibility to provide for his family. For example, in a study analyzing the decrease in men who fulfill the role of breadwinner, Gerson (1993) stated that two new trends could be seen among American men. One was an increase in men who participated in family life (“involved fathers”), and the other was an increase in men who shied away from family responsibilities (“autonomous men”). Gerson asserted that evading family responsibilities was a pattern of behavior that men took when they were denied the authority they traditionally held as breadwinner and failed to build a new (nonauthoritarian) relationship with women and children. Gerson pointed out that the latter trend—specifically, the increasing number of men who gave up their economic and non-economic responsibilities for child-rearing through divorce or separation—was a problem having a huge negative impact on American society as a whole.

To summarize, the socialization of childcare was advanced publicly in Sweden and through market mechanisms in the United States. In both countries, care work that was previously provided free in the home was now being provided for a fee by many women, although there was a difference in that, in Sweden, these women were employed in the public sector, and, in the United States, they were low-wage immigrant workers.² It must be noted that, even in Sweden, where more men participate in family life, it is not correct to say that the reason women are spending less time doing housework and child-rearing is because men are taking their place. On the other hand, two trends going in opposite directions—participation in family life and withdrawal from the family—are being seen among American men as the single-breadwinner model weakens.

III. The difficulty of making the transition to the dual-earning model in Japan

Japan, along with Southern Europe, has the lowest female workforce participation among the developed countries. However, this is not to say that Japanese women have traditionally not worked. Tsutsui (2015) points out that the male-breadwinner family model was more entrenched in the West than in Japan. In the 1960s, the percentages of women participating in the workforces of major Western countries were generally below that of Japan at around 40 to 50%. On the other hand, in 1960, the percentage of women participating in Japan’s workforce was 60%. Even in 1975, when the number of full-time housewives in Japan increased the most, the percentage never fell below 50%. This is because, as is well presented in Ochiai (2004), the

shares of people engaged in agriculture and self-employment remained solid for a comparatively long time in Japan's postwar economy, and the fact that workplaces and residences tend to be adjacent in these sectors made it possible for women to work as family workers. Why, then, has the shift toward the dual-earning model occurred in Western countries, where the male-breadwinner family model was stronger, but not yet in Japan? The question that must be asked here is: Why can't Japan escape from a male-breadwinner family model adapted to its period of high economic growth even after becoming a postindustrial society? Tsutsui (2016) states the reason is that the model "fit too well." In the following, I discuss what precisely "fit too well" means.

The combination of a man who is devoted to maintaining the family's livelihood and a woman who is devoted to housework and child-rearing is, it could be said, a team of two specialists. Both the man and the woman are specialists in their respective areas, and both require the services of the other. Thus, their linkage is theoretically stronger than the combination of two generalists who can cover both areas and, in this sense, do not require the services of the other person. It is often said that divorces increase when women have economic power. This is because a woman who is a generalist is less dependent upon a man's breadwinning ability than a full-time housewife who is a specialist. Kano (2004) states that, in certain ways, Japan's high economic growth was made possible by the strong bond formed between "salaryman" husbands and full-time housewives. He called this system the "Company Employee–Housewife System."

Even if it is argued that identity as a "salaryman" is unique to Japanese men, (Dasgupta 2013, Taga 2011), the combination of a male employee and housewife is not exclusive to Japanese society. What, then, is uniquely Japanese? It is the existence of corporations that fully supported the coupling of a company employee and housewife and that generously provided them with financial assistance. In this sense, Japan's gender structure is not a dyad comprising men and women, but rather a triad that includes corporations (Ogasawara 2016). Japanese companies of the postwar era stepped into the daily lives of not only their employees, but also their employees' families, and attempted to align them with the company's interests. An example is the New Life Movement, which major corporations initiated in the 1950s. The movement's aim was to make their (male) employees' lives more democratic, rational, and cultural and thereby provide an environment in which they could devote themselves to their work without worries. It mainly organized employees' wives and provided guidance on all modern household matters, including family planning (Takeda 2014).

The various family allowances companies paid also strengthened the triad's bonds. Historically, government-provided public assistance for housing and children's education has been limited in Japan in comparison with Western countries, and therefore corporations have filled this role. Many companies have paid some kind of allowance—such as a dependent allowance or childcare allowance—that is linked to the number of dependents an employee has. As a result, the entire family became dependent upon the company. Thus, instead of viewing her husband's absence from home due to long working hours as a problem, a wife would actively support her husband's giving everything to his work.

The "gender triad" was supported by the government as being in alignment with the national goal of building economic strength. For example, the aforementioned New Life Movement received strong government backup from its very beginning. Additionally, the tax and social security systems that were beneficial to households with a full-time housewife or a housewife working part-time whose income was below a certain amount were not reformed for many years despite criticism that they limited women's participation in the workforce. Amano (2006) points out that men's work-centric lifestyle during the nation's period of high economic growth was a product of a "happy collusion" of the man, his wife, and the company. In this way, the bond between the company employee and housewife, both of whom were specialists and therefore tended to be tightly coupled, became the extremely strong "gender triad" with the powerful support of the corporation (and the government supporting the corporation).

IV. Cracks in the “gender triad”

The “gender triad,” which was a “happy” thing during Japan’s high economic growth, gradually turned into something not so happy for company employees and housewives when the economic foundation changed. Beginning in the 1970s, global competition among companies intensified within the postindustrial economy. In the 1990s, even major companies became exposed to the risk of bankruptcy, with some of them actually going under. There were more and more cases in which companies, though not faced with bankruptcy, were nonetheless forced to reduce personnel expenses, and thus shed employees through restructuring. This was the process by which an extremely important assumption for the company employee and housewife coupling lost its validity—specifically, the expectation of the husband’s long-term stable employment in exchange for long working hours. The result was a diminishment of the benefits men received for sacrificing their private lives and devoting themselves selflessly to the company, and that women received for giving up their own career to support their husband’s.

In addition, companies sought to reduce personnel costs and achieve management flexibility by increasing non-regular employment to take the place of regular employment. As a result, there was an increase in the number of so-called “freeters” (part-time jobbers), who could not find employment as a regular employee after graduation and who could not expect to receive guaranteed long-term employment or stable increases in their wages. On the other hand, the amount of work required of regular employees, whose number was now smaller, increased, in turn leading to longer working hours. According to Kuroda (2018), the percentage of full-time employees who work at least 11 hours per weekday has been increasing for both men and women for forty years since the mid-1970s. For men, this percentage, which was less than 10% in 1976, reached about 30% and for women about 10% in 2016.

It has been pointed out that the increasing trend in Japanese workers’ weekday working hours is putting considerable strain on family life. For example, Shinada (2015) reported that the number of nuclear families with children that had meals together with all members present fell by roughly half between 1988 and 2012. Moreover, the families that were most unable to have dinner together were male-breadwinner families in which the husband had a relatively high income. Families in which both parents worked with the mother working full time had more opportunities to have dinner together. Additionally, Watanabe (2016), using the 2015 National Time Use Survey, analyzed why, despite rising awareness among men that the husband should naturally be involved in housework and child-rearing, the difference between the hours spent doing housework between Japanese men and women remained large. She states that the number of men working long hours is growing, particularly among men in their thirties and forties, and confirms that this is hindering growth in the ratio of men who do housework, and, as a result, suppressing the number of hours spent doing housework among all men. Furthermore, Watanabe notes a conspicuous presence of young fathers who want to be involved in child-rearing, despite the fact that nearly half of all men in their thirties work at least ten hours on weekdays.

In this way, under the postindustrial economy that has existed since the 1970s, the long-term stable employment and wage increases that were expected during Japan’s period of high economic growth are no longer assured, while, at the same time, working hours are lengthening to the point that they are affecting family life. Moreover, as the balance between the benefits and costs of being a company employee deteriorates, getting married and having children are becoming a burden for men. Both Taga (2011) and Yamada (2001) point out that having a family is becoming a burden in terms of both cost and risk for modern Japanese men. In fact, the number of unmarried men is rising rapidly. The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS) announces that the lifetime never-married rate for Japanese men, which is estimated from the never-married rate of men in their late forties and that in their early fifties, is more than one in five as of 2015.

V. Early signs of change in the male-breadwinner family model

Even if the cracks in the old triad of company employees, housewives, and corporations can be detected in the rapid increase of unmarried people, the dominance of the male-breadwinner family model has been maintained for a long time among married people. For example, according to the 14th Japanese National Fertility Survey conducted by IPSS, approximately 70% of women who gave birth to their first child between 2005 and 2009 were unemployed, and no change in this percentage had been seen over the course of 20 years beginning in 1985. Many women leave employment when they give birth and return to the workforce, primarily as part-timers, when their child reaches a certain age. This employment pattern that only supplements the family budget cannot be described as the kind of full-scale dual-earning model that is seen in Western countries. It is therefore noteworthy that, according to the 15th Japanese National Fertility Survey, the percentage of women who continued their jobs even after childbirth exceeded 50% for the first time between 2010 and 2014. While women who left work to give birth remained high at about 60% over the course of approximately 20 years until 2009, the number who continued work grew by more than ten percentage points in just five years. Furthermore, if only regular company employees are considered, the number of women who continued work rose substantially from about 40% between 1985 and 1989 to roughly 70% between 2010 and 2014.

A similar change is reported by Nagase (2014), who measured the rate of employment continuation after first childbirth using Longitudinal Survey of Adults in the 21st Century conducted by Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare from 2002 to 2010. Beginning in 2007, a significant rise in the employment continuation rate was observed, regardless of company size. According to Nagase, a factor thought to be behind this change is an enhancement of childcare leave allowances in 2007 and 2010. Nomura (2017) also writes that approximately 70% of female regular company employees continue their jobs after childbirth, and in the case of large enterprises, nearly all women are now said not to leave their jobs. Here I will use micro data to examine the implications that the increasing female employment continuation rate has for the shift in the male-breadwinner family model. This dataset is based on an interview study that was conducted at two major enterprises in 2017. Of the two companies, Company X is a manufacturer whose head office is in Osaka, and Company Y is a financial institution headquartered in Tokyo. The personnel departments of these companies were asked to select employees as subjects for the interviews. Selection covered male and female employees in a young-aged group in their mid-twenties to thirties and a middle-aged group in their forties to mid-fifties. The survey interviewed a total of 26 people from the two companies. In the case of Company X, respondents totaled 14 employees, with five female employees in the young group, five female employees in the middle-aged group, two male employees in the young group, and two male employees in the middle-aged group. In the case of Company Y, they totaled 12 employees with five female employees in the young group, three female employees in the middle-aged group, two male employees in the young group, and two male employees in the middle-aged group (see Table 1).

About one month prior to the interviews, a preliminary questionnaire was distributed to the respondents for the purpose of obtaining information about all job transfers after joining the company and changes in their family makeup. Responses were received by email. On the day of the interviews, researchers shared the task of conducting the interviews, which lasted between 90 minutes and two hours and focused on such matters as the background leading up to respondents' joining the company; work-related events experienced after joining the company; family events experienced since joining the company; changes in their views of employment as a result of those experiences; involvement in housework, child-rearing, nursing care, etc.; relationship with spouse, parents, and children; and vision of their own career and life in the future.

Table 1. Attributes of interviewees

Company	Employee	Sex	Age	Marital status	Presence of child(ren) and age(s)
Company X	B	Female	26	Married	0
Company X	A	Female	33	Married	None
Company X	D	Female	33	Married	4, 1
Company X	E	Female	33	Single	None
Company X	C	Female	34	Married	1
Company X	I	Female	42	Married	9, 6
Company X	H	Female	46	Married	16, 13
Company X	J	Female	46	Single	None
Company X	G	Female	48	Divorced	19
Company X	F	Female	50	Married	16
Company X	L	Male	31	Married	1
Company X	K	Male	33	Married	2
Company X	N	Male	42	Married	6
Company X	M	Male	52	Married	22, 19
Company Y	V	Female	34	Single	None
Company Y	T	Female	35	Married	6, 2
Company Y	U	Female	36	Married	0
Company Y	S	Female	37	Married	2
Company Y	P	Female	38	Married	6, 4
Company Y	R	Female	41	Married	8, 4
Company Y	Q	Female	46	Married	10
Company Y	O	Female	54	Married	24, 21
Company Y	Z	Male	35	Married	6
Company Y	Y	Male	39	Married	9, 6
Company Y	W	Male	41	Married	13, 10
Company Y	X	Male	45	Married	15, 8

1. Attitudes toward employment continuation among female employees

It became apparent in the interviews that the female respondents had not all had the intention of continuing work for a considerable time when they first joined the company. The ratios of women who had had the idea that they would work for a long time and those who had joined the company without that idea were 5:5 in the case of Company X and 5:3 in the case of Company Y. Additionally, a comparison of the young group and middle-aged group does not reveal a clear tendency for women of the young group to have had a stronger desire to continue employment.

However, it was revealed that, at the time of the interview, almost all the women were planning their lives on the premise that they would continue working. For example, according to Ms. D of Company X, she felt it natural that she and her husband would both work after marriage, and she did not recall ever talking with her husband about her quitting or not quitting. As represented by Ms. S of Company Y, who said “I did not think about quitting when I became pregnant,” the women’s intention to continue working was not shaken even when childbirth came into the picture. One needs to be careful here, as the interview subjects were “successful cases” selected by their personnel departments, meaning that employees who did in fact quit were excluded from the survey. Nevertheless, as will be discussed below, these female employees’ attitudes toward employment continuation contrast with those of women workers from a similar survey conducted ten years earlier.

Factors that seemed to influence the female employees’ attitudes toward continuing employment were,

first, the existence of a company system that supports a balance between life events (e.g., housework, child-rearing, long-term care, etc.) and career, and second, the presence of older female employees who continue work by actually using those systems. Ms. V of Company Y is currently single, but she feels it would be possible to continue working even if she had a family. The reason she gave was that “The company’s system is very good, and when I see older colleagues [continue working], I think I can do it too.” Ms. I of Company X, who originally planned to quit a few years after marriage, also explained, “Around that time, I noticed several women around me and in the same workplace who still worked after giving birth. So, I thought, well, I could do that. My workplace needed me, and I began thinking it would be natural for me to continue working as long as it did not become too difficult.”

Many women with the intention and hope to continue working were also identified in a study of how dual-earner couples viewed employment that was conducted by Ogasawara in 2005.³ However, at the time of that study, there were indications that even if women could continue working at the present time, they were unsure about the future. For this reason, there were many married couples who covered the essential parts of their family budget with the husband’s income and used the wife’s income for savings and leisure activities. In this way couples prepared themselves for the loss of the wife’s income at any time. In contrast, what is noticeable from the current survey is the expectation that women will continue to work. Systems that support work-family balance have expanded between the times of the two surveys, and opportunities for women to see other women around them actually achieve this balance have increased. To some degree, it has become possible for women to anticipate that they will continue working until retirement age should they desire to do so, particularly in large enterprises such as those in this survey that are forward-looking in terms of supporting female employees.

2. Attitudes toward shared livelihood

In the 2005 survey, it was pointed out that what the employment of a full-time working wife meant differed from couple to couple, and that the working wife was not always seen as maintaining the family’s livelihood. In more than one-third of thirty dual-income married couples that were raising children and in which both the husband and wife had continued working full-time after graduation, the wife had no intention of sharing responsibility for maintaining the family’s livelihood. For example, some wives took out a relatively small amount in loans in their own name even when their income was equivalent to their husband’s in order to have the freedom to quit work at any time. Others stated that they were “doing a job they enjoyed” rather than working for income and would “quit if they lost interest in the job.” A considerable number of husbands indicated that it did not matter to them whether their wife worked or not, and it was revealed that they saw employment as being for the wife’s sake—e.g., “She likes working” or “It’s better for her mental health if she works”—rather than helping with the family budget. Additionally, there were husbands who, while desiring that the couple share responsibility for maintaining the family’s livelihood on the one hand, were not concerned about the degree of contribution their wife made on the other. These husbands had a desire to mentally share responsibility for maintaining the family’s livelihood with their wives, but did not strongly demand the actual splitting of family accounts. It is possible that they did not ask for a shared family budget because they were unsure if their wife could continue working into the future.

In contrast, economic considerations ranked high as a reason for continuing work given by the female interviewees in the current survey. For example, Ms. S of Company Y explained her reason for continuing work in this way: “Rather than saying that I really want to work, it’s probably more accurate to say that I would be giving up a lot if I quit.” This response suggests a difference in thinking from that of the wives of more than a decade ago who stated that they would quit their jobs if they lost interest in them. Ms. S says candidly that she has not felt her job to be very interesting, and she is not aiming to gain self-fulfillment through her job. The reason Ms. S gave for continuing to work was, “So I can live, I guess.” But then she asked herself, “What else is there?” To this she added, “I suppose it’s because I want a place where I can

demonstrate my abilities a little.” It could be argued that Ms. S’s thinking vis-à-vis employment is very similar to that of many men who continue doing a job not because they particularly enjoy it, but in order to fulfill their livelihood responsibility. Ten years ago, when women who continued work were the exception rather than the rule, maintaining a livelihood was not thought to be a woman’s responsibility. Accordingly, the reasons for continuing work at that time when doing so involved significant hurdles for women were non-economic reasons including “because working is fun,” “it’s better than being stuck in the house,” and the like. Over the course of ten years, women’s continued employment has become less unusual than it once was, and prospects that women will be able to continue working have risen, particularly in large enterprises like the ones surveyed that actively support work-life balance. This change seems to be reflected in these women’s remarks that they work primarily for economic reasons.

In fact, the women who participated in the interviews were generally highly committed to continuing employment and also had strong awareness vis-à-vis the sharing of livelihood responsibilities. Ms. D of Company X says, “My husband and I agree how good it is that both of us work. If only one of us worked, our savings would be one-tenth of what they are now. That’s the kind of situation we would face, I think.” Ms. D says she has plotted out a financial plan premised on dual incomes that extends until she reaches the age of 90. Likewise, Ms. U of Company Y says, “We’re fifty-fifty when it comes to our family budget.” She adds that she and her husband talk about selling their house “if one of us quits” or “if one of us takes a part-time job and we can no longer pay for necessities.” In the past, it was exclusively the wife who would quit a job or change from full-time to part-time work. What makes Ms. U’s statement notable is that she said “if one of us quits,” without limiting the possibility of such a change to the wife only. This suggests that the possibility of quitting exists equally for the husband as well as the wife—or, in other words, that the likelihood of this possibility occurring for the wife is considered to be as low as it is for the husband. Similarly, Ms. I of Company X, who has a higher income than her husband, thinks that “We power the family together” and “I can support us if something happens to [my husband’s] company.” Similarly, Ms. B of Company X said, “I suppose my husband is like other young people today in that he’s not the aggressive type who says, ‘I’m going to get married and be the breadwinner for my family.’ So I have to work too.”

Ms. B’s view of today’s young men is supported to some degree by the comments made by the male interviewees. For example, Mr. L of Company X is married to a part-time lecturer at a university. When explaining why he thinks having a dual income is good even after having children, he said, “Having money lets us have a lifestyle that is satisfying for us, so I think it is good that both of us work.” Moreover, Mr. L noted that, among his close friends of the same age, he knows of only one whose wife is a full-time housewife. With regard to dual-earner couples, he said, “I think they have become very common.”

Mr. K of Company X has a wife who also works for Company X. However, it is probably not accurate to call their union a “marriage between colleagues.” This is because they were already dating when they were job-hunting. They decided to join Company X because it seemed to be a realistic place for them to work as a couple. Since then, he has been sharing housework, child-rearing, and livelihood maintenance with his wife on a fifty-fifty basis. However, there was one time when his resolve was shaken: when it was feared that his wife would give birth prematurely. When it crossed his mind that his child might be born with a disability due to the premature delivery, he thought, “I’ll have to get even more serious about my work.” In other words, facing the possibility that his wife might not be able to continue work in order to care for their disabled child, he became aware of the responsibility of supporting a family alone for the first time since his marriage. Or, to put it another way, it can be said that until he encountered an emergency—the threat of his child’s premature delivery—he had not thought of himself as the family’s breadwinner.

3. Women who are the main livelihood providers

There were two cases in which the wife was the main livelihood provider: Ms. O and Ms. Q of Company Y. In the past, when a Japanese man and woman working in different regions married, it was almost always

the woman who quit her job and went to where the man worked. Such a situation was seen in this survey as well, as it applied to Mr. M of Company X and to Mr. Y and Mr. Z of Company Y. However, in Ms. O's case, the person who changed vocations and work locations as a result of the marriage was the husband. Ms. O said, "At the beginning, we had no money. We had nothing. And that's still true today [laughs]. But even so, I felt we were fine, probably because I had a job. So I didn't have much in the way of financial expectations for my husband. I thought things would be fine if he did a job that he liked."

Unlike Ms. O, Ms. Q married a colleague. Traditionally, when a husband and wife worked at the same company and if one of them were to quit, it would be the wife who left. In fact, this was the case in the married couples of Mr. M of Company X and of Mr. Y and Mr. Z of Company Y. In the household of Ms. Q, both spouses pursued their careers even after their child was born with the help of their respective parents. Ms. Q described her thoughts when both spouses were promoted to management positions in the following way: "Both of us were working a lot of overtime hours, and I wondered how long we could continue living like that." Later, when Ms. Q was promoted even higher to senior-level management and took on heavier responsibilities, she discussed the matter with her husband. After considering their individual skills, her husband left the company in order to look for an opportunity in another firm with a more flexible working style. At the time of the interview, he was still searching for a job.

4. Partial movement toward the dual-earning model

Six years have passed since the Japanese government began emphasizing women's participation in the labor market as a part of its growth strategy. The establishment of systems supporting work-family balance is progressing in companies like Company X and Company Y. Meanwhile, more and more women are continuing to work by actually using these systems and becoming role models for other women. Women are increasingly committed to continuation of employment, and these women and their partners plan their lives based on the premise of earning dual incomes. In the survey conducted over a decade ago, many women also spoke of continuing work with the desire to become economically independent. However, although such statements as "I want to buy my own things with my own money" and "I think I have to do something for my old age" suggested that women wanted to assume responsibility for their own lives to a certain degree, it did not appear that they were prepared to support the lives of their husband and children. It could be said that, in a sense, the earlier women's wish to be economically independent had more in common with women earning just enough money to cover their own personal spending from a part-time job than with that of someone bearing responsibility for sustaining the family's livelihood.

In contrast, women who participated in this survey spoke more clearly about their responsibility for the family budget. Among them were women who spoke of establishing a financial plan premised on dual incomes and of having mental readiness to become the family's breadwinner should the husband's company fail. Additionally, men in dual-earner couples now clearly mention their reliance on their wife's income. This includes a man who said he wanted his wife to continue working to maintain their current standard of living, and a man who only became aware that he could become his family's breadwinner when faced with the emergency of a premature birth. Examples in which the solidity of women's economic power is clearly shown included the Ms. O couple, in which the husband quit his job and moved to his wife's work location and the wife became the main provider of their livelihood, and the Ms. Q couple, in which the husband resigned from the company in order to avoid a situation in which both spouses would be aiming to advance to senior-level management in the same company.

VI. Possible implications of the decline of the male-breadwinner family model for Japanese men

Our examination has shown that as the costs and risks of the male-breadwinner family model rise, the

dual-earning model has become a reality in Japan to a certain degree. If this trend continues, will more men participate in family life, like in Sweden? Or is it possible that more men will withdraw from family life, as is found among some men in the United States? I would like to explore this matter in the final part of this paper.

1. Men who participate in family life

Throughout the survey, it was apparent that the way men interacted with their families differed from the conventional “work first” attitude. For the men interviewed, the importance of their families was clearly high. Many men did not hesitate to say that their family was very important to them. Some men said that leaving work in time to pick up their child at nursery school was difficult, but they tried at least to make it home in time to give the child a bath. Others said that although they left most things to their wife on weekdays, they tried to spend as much time as possible with their child on weekends.

Mr. W of Company Y, who has a working wife with a part-time job, said, “Right now parenting is my main concern. I want to give my child as much love as I can.” He added that his child is “a kind of living joy.” Similarly, Mr. Z of Company Y, whose wife is a full-time housewife, said, “I have a family now and it has become the center of all I do. No matter how busy my job gets, I go to my family whenever it needs me.”

Mr. X of Company Y also has a wife who is a full-time housewife. He has not done much of the housework since his marriage. Even so, he took his crying child out to pacify her after arriving home late at night, and he took his child out alone on weekends when she was still in diapers. “It was a pretty important time for me,” he said. Even now, he and his high-school-age daughter are close enough to go out shopping together. He is thus giving a serious thought to an anticipated job assignment away from his family. The reason is because when he hears from his colleagues who have relocated how they go home for their children’s sports festivals and parents’ days, he feels depressed. Mr. X sees a parent-child relationship that is built solely on such events as “just photographs, like snapshots.” He commented that “The family’s time together becomes fragmented. It’s hard.” Mr. X wants to spend time having meals and doing other activities with his family each day, not to mention participating in those events. He said that male employees who similarly do not want a job transfer talk about this among themselves, asking why men do not have the same options women have to work in specified regions only without the need to relocate, and even mentioning the possibility of career changes in some cases. From what Mr. X said in the interview, job transfers are anticipated to become a major problem not only for women who aim to balance work and family, but also for men who put importance on the time spent with their family.

Hamaguchi (2013) refers to the employment system often found in Japanese companies as “membership-type.” This is in contrast with what he calls the “job-type employment” of Europe and the United States. He insightfully says that a characteristic of membership-type employment is its unconditional nature, whereby once a person becomes a member of a company, he or she is expected to “do anything, anywhere, at any time.” During Japan’s period of high economic growth, the unconditional loyalty to the company in the sense of “doing anything, anywhere, at any time” came with rewards in the form of long-term stable employment and wage increases. However, in a time when such rewards cannot necessarily be expected, the unconditional nature of working has come to be regarded as a major sacrifice by men who have clearly begun to want to participate in family life. Notwithstanding his youth, the aforementioned Mr. X was selected to be a branch manager. For this and other reasons, he is evidently a promising employee for Company Y. To lose such capable employees for career changes only to avoid job transfers because they value family life must be a loss for the company as well. The system that makes “doing anything, anywhere, at any time” its de facto standard for male employees is coming to a point where reexamination is called for.

2. Men who withdraw from family life

Gerson (1993) warned American society of an increase in the number of men who abandoned their child-rearing responsibilities. To what degree does the possibility exist that Japanese men will similarly withdraw

from family life? As was mentioned above, one route toward this is already becoming a reality. Specifically, there is a rapid rise in the number of unmarried men. A difference with the United States is that there are far fewer children in Japan who suffer from the loss of their father due to divorce or separation.

Regarding married men, can any trends toward withdrawal from family life be identified? Although no such men were actually found in the survey, there were cases that theoretically suggested their existence. For example, Ms. R of Company Y spent approximately two years on an overseas assignment while she was single. She married after returning to Japan and is now the mother of two children. She moved near to her parents' home in order to raise her children, and completely depends on her parents to pick her children up from nursery school and for her children's dinners and bathing. Ms. R says her role is to manage "Team R." Team R comprises seven members: her two children, Ms. R and her husband, her parents, and her single younger sister who lives in her parents' home. Ms. R's role as a manager is to make sure "everyone in the team leaves home cheerfully each day." On the other hand, referring to her husband, she says, "He hasn't changed his work routine [since marriage]" and "He spends a little time [with the kids] on days off, and not much at all on weekdays." Although she said that "In eight years, he has only taken one day off because a child had a fever, and that was just the other day," she has few complaints, saying, "I'm happy because everything is going well."

Last year, Ms. R waived the restrictions on where she would work and submitted a request for a transfer overseas. If her wish comes true, she plans to take her parents and children with her, and anticipates that her husband will remain in Japan for his job. Regarding this plan, Ms. R explained that "We have built our family," and she was ready for an overseas assignment. From Ms. R's story, one pictures a relatively weak father-child relationship, not to mention the spousal relationship, and a strong mother who is pushing forward in her career. In cases more radical than Ms. R's, fathers can become something like the "autonomous men" identified by Gerson even if they do not get divorced. Taken to the extreme, the father's role may become limited to conceiving children.

VII. Conclusion

Japan is lagging behind Western countries in terms of the shift from the single-breadwinner family model to the dual-earning model. The reason for this is not because Japanese women have not traditionally worked; rather, it is partly because of the strength of a "gender triad" consisting of company employees, housewives, and corporations that formed during the nation's years of high economic growth. Macro statistical data show, however, that the number of women who continue to work even after childbirth is increasing. In this survey, I was able to confirm, using micro data, that the development of systems to support work-family balance has progressed in some companies, that women increasingly continue employment by actually using these systems, that more women, inspired by role models in their workplace, commit to continuing employment, and, as a result, that there are now men and women who plan their lives based on the assumption that both will work.

However, the transition in Japan to the dual-earning model has been slow, and in the meantime, there has been a rapid increase in the number of men (and more recently women) who reluctantly withdraw from family life by not marrying, despite their desire to marry. What could be done to promote a shift toward the dual-earning model before it is too late? First, it will be necessary to provide support so that the development of systems supporting work-family balance expands in more companies. Additionally, as is clearly demonstrated in the cases of Sweden and the United States, the socialization of childcare will be essential for the transition to the dual-earning model. The extreme shortness of the amount of time Japanese fathers spend for housework and child-rearing compared to their counterparts in the West is undoubtedly a problem. However, Japanese society must soberly accept the fact that fathers will be unable to compensate for the shrinkage of home child-rearing hours that is occurring as a result of mothers' entry into the workforce, and implement sufficient

countermeasures, such as promoting the installation of nursery schools.

That there are children waiting for admittance into nursery schools is a topic that has received lengthy discussion in Japanese society. I believe the findings of this paper will be useful when considering this problem. For wives to share the responsibility for maintaining the family's livelihood with their husbands, it has been important to have the "prospect" of their being able to continue working. If this "prospect" is lacking, a couple that appears to have dual incomes on the surface would still face the uncertainty of the wife's leaving her job or being forced to leave her job someday, and would therefore be unable to commit entirely to the dual-earning model. Because of this, it has been necessary to be prepared for the possibility of returning to the male-breadwinner family model at any time. The same applies to nursery schools. Things are on the wrong track if couples are saying that they could "finally" put their child into a nursery school. If they do not have the "prospect" of being able to put their child in a nursery school without fail, they cannot apply the dual-earning model with peace of mind.

In addition, to encourage men to participate in family life and prevent their withdrawal from the family as the dual-earning model takes hold, it will be necessary to reexamine the unconditional working style of "doing anything, anywhere, at any time" and rectify the situation in which they must work long hours. Will they participate in family life, or will they withdraw from it? It seems that, at present, Japanese men stand at a crossroads leading in two completely opposite directions.

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Notes

1. According to Funabashi (2006), who compared and examined the child-rearing strategies of married couples based on fieldwork conducted in three countries (Japan, France, and Sweden), the national governments of both France and Sweden took the initiative in socializing childcare; however, their policies differed. Unlike Sweden, where the idea that infants should be raised by their parents encouraged the introduction of the childcare leave system, the parent-child relationship in France is more detached, and historically it has been customary to entrust children to others. Thus, France went in the direction of expanding its nursing and educational systems. Additionally, it was working women that were the primary target of France's national family policies (Kamio 2007). For many years, programs to support work-family balance focused mainly on women and not on parents, and men's participation in housework and child-rearing is not as advanced in France as it is in Sweden.
2. In both Sweden and the United States, the providers of care work are primarily women, although a difference exists in that, in Sweden, care work is provided by women employed in the public sector, while in the United States, it is provided by low-wage immigrant workers. No "de-gendering" of care work has taken place. While this is an important problem in itself, I will not discuss it further here.
3. Both studies involved interviews with women possessing relatively high academic backgrounds who were continuing work. However, the studies were not conducted for comparative purposes and cannot serve as strict control samples. The aim of this paper is to provide an exploratory discussion, and it is anticipated that its content will be supported with larger sampling.

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