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Work Culture and the Declining Birth Rate in Japan

Introduction

In this paper, I will explore how women in Japan are facing the full responsibility of having to be socially expected to take care of their children, making it difficult for them to continue working. With men being the dominating gender holding the power, women are typically not standard regular workers being the cause of the wage gap in Japan. Aside from having maternity leave, many mothers or expectant mothers choose to leave their place of employment. Women with children who do choose to stay in the workforce find it hard to stay in a stable position for income as there's prejudice towards them being inferior to men. It's common for men to fall under the expectation of working long overtime hours, whereas women have a sort of duty to the household to take care of household affairs as well as raising their children on their own. Due to the social pressures of having to be the sole responsibility of taking care of the family, many women are choosing their career over marriage leading to the decline in birth rates. This declining rate is also leading Japan to be a super aging society leading to other consequences. I will also go into how though the Japanese government is making steps towards easing the burden on mothers and expectant mothers, and how it's not enough to incentivize women to start a family.

Methodology

In order to collect credible and accurate data, I primarily looked through the online database that California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) has to offer for their students using the OneSearch function. I also collected some information from google scholar for more specific information while making sure to only choose work that was peer reviewed. I also used review articles, journals, news articles, and other sources from my Japanese 311: Social Issues in Japan class. I primarily focused on typing up key words or phrases through OneSearch to find information to help my research while also forming my own thoughts and opinions on the topic relating to Japanese declining birth rates as well as some core issues within Japanese society.

Throughout my search, I will analyze these pieces of information to create a methodical order of the information I will present. First, I will give a brief overview of Japanese society to give context as to why women are suffering from societal pressures. Then I will go further into the role women have and the kind of pressures placed on them. I will go into the consequences and lack of support they are given. Finally, I will tie everything together with my own thoughts on the key problem that should be addressed.

Language

I chose to keep certain words in Japanese as I felt that they were truly authentic and unique to Japanese culture. I chose to keep マタハラ, *matahara*, short for maternity harassment. This is a phenomenon where a pregnant or recently conceiving mother faces emotional or physical harassment at their place of work. I also chose to keep 飲み会, *nomikai*, which is literally means drinking and gathering. *Nomikai* is something primarily seen amongst regular employees who are expected to go with their bosses where they go to a place, typically a pub or restaurant, and spend time together drinking and socializing.

Literature Review

There have been studies on what individuals are seeking in potential marriage partners. A survey conducted on 30 educated Japanese women from marriage agencies were questioned in order to attain this information. The outcome of this research shows that "...Japanese women continue to highly value men's income-earning capacity. Men, in contrast, value a partner with moderate income-earning potential" (Brinton, et.al 2020). The expectation on what men wanted have subtly changed over time as they're not seeking some more income. Overall, it shows that both genders customarily follow the common gender roles. One of the largest limitation studies was that there were only 30 women interviewed.

There has been research done specifically on first childbirth and the wage-penalty women face within the workforce in Japan. The focus is primarily on the wage gap between men and women and seeing if the timing has any correlation towards the firstborn child. The method used to get to the finding was using a data set from the Japan Household Panel Survey (the JHPS/KHPS 2004-2015). Results showed that Japanese mothers were shown to have dropped wages when having children (Dumauli 2019). There showed no correlation between whether or not these wages would drop depending on if the child born was the first born or not.

There has been a recent emergence of *matahara*. Many women feel that they cannot tell their bosses when they get pregnant out of fear of being harassed or fired. Women within the workplace feel this way. This is a result from former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Womenomics (PBS NewsHour). This was his push to get women to participate within the economy by getting more women to work. However, they're pushed into a setting where they're not on an equal playing field as men. A survey was conducted that shows up to 60 percent of pregnant women within the workforce will quit their jobs.

Japan has had a very limited availability of afterschool programs for young children especially depending on the prefecture a family lives in. It's been known that there have been very long waitlists for a child to be accepted into a facility. Studies have shown "... that the labor market participation rate decreases by 10.9 percent..." (Takaku 2019). This shortage of availability of after school childcare has been detrimental to the workforce which inhibits an already short supply of individuals being able to work.

There are direct sources of what life is like for a typical working mother when the fathers do not do much at home whether it be typical household chores or child care. There was an analysis done by a professor at Keio University explaining women that work about 50 hours weekly also do 25 hours of chores while their husbands don't do more than 5 hours of chores. Women who are working have a large gap from men due to the nature of contract and regular workers (Rich 2019). Regular workers get a salary whereas contract workers only get a part of what a regular worker would make while also not getting as much benefits.

To go further in depth, this devaluation of women has become the norm of society. As they stopped working for a period of time after World War II, women have slowly gone back to work to make ends meet or pursue their own career. They're devalued at their place of work, and if a mother seems as if she's not devoted, she is viewed as a neglectful mother (Nemoto 2013). For women in Japan, they're stuck in a rut with little rest and having the burden of doing work for little pay and having to run the household. The mother is swamped with work and daily life responsibilities, and the father is oftentimes expected to stay overtime and going to *nomikai*.

With the rapid concern with decline in birth rates, there's also a lot of attention on the aging population within Japan. An alarming amount of the population is over the age of 65 years old. The focus of this article is on how there needs to be active measures taken to improve the

social and work environment, working towards children's and women's health, and the effects of stress on society, the mother, and their children (Nomura, et. al 2019). This article proposes different solutions for the government to take into consideration.

There have been noticeable changes in fathers being more involved with their children (North 2009). This change was observed where fathers had a change in their outlook on how families should be. However this change has only been on too small of a scale for it to make a drastic change from 30-40 years ago. Changing deeply rooted traditions is a task that seems nearly impossible to do, but is something that is necessary.

Discussion

The core problem that needs to be addressed with *matahara* is the general outlook Japanese society has in terms of the workforce. Within many aspects of daily life, the general work environment is one that's definitely male dominated. The Japanese government needs to take steps towards addressing the matter of *matahara* to prevent difficulties for not just the women, but men as well. Oftentimes male workers commonly go into extensive overtime work. Women are seen as a burden especially while pregnant or shortly after their pregnancy. This is largely due to the fact that they cannot work as long as the male regular workers with a normal salary, if they have other obligations towards their family. However women typically are only given the status of being a "contract" worker which makes significantly less money. Regular workers are typically promised lifetime employment at their company and make significantly more than a contract worker. A good portion of contract workers are women due to the fact that they're seen as too risky to hire in the case that they get pregnant. This prejudice towards women has led to *matahara* where expectant mothers are treated poorly by mental or physical harassment, termination of their employment contract, or being forced to leave. It's difficult for

women to have children in hostile environments in a place where they are trying to make a living while wage gaps are a prominent issue there as well. The regular employed male workers will typically bring their income home to their wife where the wife has the duty of allotting that money towards bills and other necessities. Women are in turn pushed out of the workforce since they're seen to be too risky to employ due to the possibility of having children. If Japan did something about lifetime employment, a lot of that pressure on men would be alleviated and not leave women to be seen as beings that are only worth raising children for. They could also put some focus into their family as most men do not participate in household affairs. "International comparisons rank Japanese men at the bottom in the proportion of family work performed" (North 2009).

Another pressing issue is Japan's understaffed and underfunded after school daycares. The unavailability of daycares have led to an extensive waiting list for children. More men are expecting their partner to have some sort of income. However when the father is also working, it's nearly impossible for the mother to have their children under some sort of supervision if they can't enroll their children in an after school daycare. It's essentially up to the mother having to stay home and constantly watch their children. So with the need of solving the problems surrounding daycares, it's up to the government to somehow enact more workers. Another concern is the fact that they should not be lowering any standards to meet this need for workers. When the quality of the workers or facility falls, it can become dangerous and even lead to death, making it completely counteractive if parents feel it's unsafe for their children to be at. With mothers being held back from going to work, it's also a strain on the economy if a portion of the population that could be working is being held back from being able to do so.

With the decline in birthrates, Japan has become a “super aging” society. Over a quarter of the 120+ million population rate is 64 years old. This puts a strain on the workforce as the availability of work becomes more limited. Though there are many people out there unemployed, many are not qualified enough for most places of employment. It’s expected that by 2030 the population will drop significantly. With this, infant care has been dropping whereas care for the elderly is demanding more attention. To fix these problems on achieving a larger labor force, there are simple fixes such as “... securing regular employment for men and women, replacing long working hours with efficient working systems, giving both men and women the option of childcare leave, shorter working hours or home teleworking, providing a nursery or using babysitters, and providing workplace support to enable couples to undergo infertility treatment alongside their work” (Nomura, et. al 2019). If these core problems are not solved, any fixes made towards the declining birth rates would just be temporary and not long term.

Conclusion

While the government tries to make incentives for women to think about starting a family at an earlier age, these are only temporary solutions. It does not solve the core issue. Focus needs to go into realizing that there is a problem with the general outlook people have within their society. There should be laws protecting women from suffering prejudice by being a contract worker or simply being harassed out. This would allow men to reeducate themselves and not feel that women are less than them. This misconception that women can not do as much as men has brought upon generations of injustice towards them. This would of course be a very difficult task to change a deeply rooted mindset. However it would be natural for women to feel safe and secure enough to start a family if and whenever they want, to grow the economy to their full potential, and solve the problem of Japan being a super aging population.

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