

Unchanged View of the Division of Gender Roles in Marriage: Interviews with Married Women in Japan

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1. Introduction

Japan has made little progress towards the realisation of a gender-equal society in the past few decades. The legal system has taken gradual steps towards gender equality, including the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Act for Men and Women and the Basic Act for Gender-Equal Society enacted in 1999. The latter law aims to realise a society in which every member regardless of gender, is respected as an individual by breaking down the fixed view of the division of gender roles. One such widely held view is that men should work outside the home while women should do all the housework. This view exists not only in the workplace but also within homes and communities. At a glance, such laws suggest that women's participation in society is being promoted, and that men's participation in housework has also been increasing. In reality however, examination of the World Economic Forum's gender gap index score, shows that Japan was ranked 104th out of 142 countries in the world (2014). While this is an increase from 105th in 2013, actually, Japan still shows little sign of going up remarkably in ranking. And it is widely recognised that the main reason for this is the unchanged view about the gendered division of labour in Japanese society as a whole.

Closely associated with these fixed ideas on the division of gender roles is the characteristic Japanese marriage. The ideal role model for a husband is the "breadwinner" or a "man who works hard to earn money for his family", while a wife is seen as a "dependent spouse" or a "woman who manages a household." While marriage is now recognised as an option in life and is no longer considered the only option as it used to be, there has been no fundamental change either in the marriage system itself

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or in the division of gender roles for married couples.

Given this background, the object of this paper is to determine factors that have sustained a marriage system based on the fixed division of gender roles, through an interview-survey with married women. In addition, we also explore how women themselves consider the Japanese way of marriage which is deeply associated with the gendered division of labour between a couple.

In this survey, we examine mainly the following points: what women think about the division of gender roles; what they gain from marriage; how they define as well as what they think about equality between husband and wife.

2. Problems of the Division of Gender Roles between Husband and Wife

In the period of high economic growth from the middle of the 1950s to the early 1970s, a full-time housewife living in an urban area became the object of admiration for many Japanese women. The majority of women had previously been engaged in both productive as well as reproductive work, but during this period, the number of married women who moved away from productive work increased. The Japanese employment system promised lifetime employment and a regular pay raise to husbands working in large companies. A full-time housewife was the symbol of a family that was sufficiently wealthy to enable the wife to have no paid job.

Nevertheless, a questioning of the ideal status of the housewife has gradually emerged in Japanese society. In the 1980s, some pieces of non-fiction focusing on depressed and gloomy housewives were published and sold well. One such well-known book was entitled, "Housewife Syndrome" (*shufu shōkōgun*) written by Madoka Yoriko. In this book, Madoka introduces stories of housewives who suffer with family problems (Madoka 1982). In it, housewives express their disappointment with their husbands' self-centred attitudes and way of looking down on women (Ibid.). In such publications, housewives were depicted as frustrated and despairing because divorce was not an option, mainly due to financial reasons. Namely, a wife's full devotion to domestic duties often meant total dependence on her husband. Ochiai points out that the marriage system based on the division of gender roles poses a financial risk in women's life (Ochiai 2004). The way in which women may be emancipated from a marriage system whereby a husband controls his wife with economic superiority and patriarchal authority continues to be one of the main issues to be addressed from the perspective of

women's studies in Japan (Inoue 2009).

In addition, Matsuda points out that the division of gender roles disturbs the good relationship between husband and wife (Matsuda 2000). The fixed idea that husband's main, if not only, obligation is to earn a living for his family promotes a society which accepts prolonged working hours for men. This results in a husband's isolation from his family, weakening family ties, and in the worst case, death through overwork (Ibid.). Furthermore, Yoshizumi argues that the marriage system in Japan which assumes a husband's superiority over his wife, gives priority in terms of social security and tax reduction to couples through marriage (Yoshizumi 1997). Moreover, she criticises that this leads to discrimination against individuals such as single mothers and children born out of marriage (Ibid.). Yoshizumi also claims that the expansion of various types of partnership and family is necessary to realise a gender-equal society (Ibid.).

Despite such negative indications, the marriage system including the roles and obligation of husband and wife in Japanese society have changed little since the 1980s. According to Matsuda, neither the number of women continuing their career after childbirth, nor the number of husbands participating in household tasks has increased (Matsuda 2013). Especially during the early parenting period, the majority of married couples continue to play the traditional husband and wife roles (Ibid.). In other words, the traditional form of a married couple, whereby a husband should work outside the home while a wife should do all the housework, remains almost unshaken.

It is noteworthy that not only men, but also many women have supported the fixed idea of the division of gender roles within the home. A survey conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research in 2013 shows that on average, only 14.9% of household tasks were carried out by husbands while 85.1% was completed by wives. Asked if they expect their husbands to do housework, only 31.4% of the wives answered "Yes", while 68.6% answered "No." Moreover, according to Nakagawa, wives' strong sense of household responsibility prevents their husbands from participating in domestic duties (Nakagawa 2010).

3. Research Methodology

It is assumed that one of the reasons why the traditional ways of marriage still

remain deeply rooted in society is that women themselves support them. Therefore, we conducted an interview survey with married women for the purpose of finding out the reason why marriages continue to be based on the fixed view of the division of gender roles. The survey was conducted with 40 married women (4 divorced women included) through semi-structured face-to-face interviews based on the personal connection method. We offered interviewees a rough structure with several questions, but also left room for their autonomy, allowing them to speak in ways which are not strictly structured by the interviewer. We tried as much as possible to conduct interviews in an informal atmosphere.

The main questions we asked are as follows: the ideal image of marriage they had before getting married and the reality after getting married; how they have benefited from the marriage and what they put up with; and what they think about equal partnership between husband and wife. The interviewees ranged from those aged around thirty to those in their 60s, considering that targets should be married at least have a certain number of years. In order to examine whether there is any difference in views of marriage between urban areas and rural areas, and, if any, what the difference is, we sought cooperation from residents in Tokyo and the Kyushu region (Kitakyushu City and Kumamoto City) as respondents. We chose the Kyushu because the region is generally recognised as an area where the consciousness of gender norms and the predominance of men over women remained strong. Moreover because of the numerous bridal magazines in the region, we also assumed that "local people tended to take a more positive stance toward the traditional marriage." The respondents consisted of 14 women in Tokyo Metropolitan Prefecture, 12 in Kumamoto City and its suburbs, and 14 in Kitakyushu City and its suburbs.

List of interviewees									
Tokyo	age	occupation before marriage	present occupation	child ren	Tokyo	age	occupation before marriage	present occupation	child ren
A	30's	specialist	family business	2	H	40's	company employee	specialist (part-time)	1
B	30's	company employee	full-time housewife	3	I	50's	company employee	full-time housewife	6
C	30's	specialist	specialist (part-time)	3	J	50's	company employee	dispatched worker	2
D	30's	company employee	specialist	1	K	50's	association staff member	full-time housewife	2
E	40's	medical specialist	medical specialist	2	L	50's	company employee	part-time work	2
F	40's	unknown	medical clerk	1	M	50's	part-time work	full-time housewife	2
G	40's	unknown	medical clerk	2	N	60's	self-employed	self-employed	2
Kumamoto	age	occupation before marriage	present occupation	child ren	Kumamoto	age	occupation before marriage	present occupation	child ren
A	30's	company employee	self-employed	1	G	40's	company employee	company officer	1
B	30's	company employee	self-employed	3	H	40's	company employee	full-time housewife	3
C	30's	company employee	full-time housewife	1	I	40's	company employee	full-time housewife	2
D	30's	self-employed	self-employed	1	J	40's	company employee	self-employed	3
E	30's	medical clerk	instructor	3	K	40's	medical specialist	specialist	2
F	30's	specialist	specialist	1	L	50's	company employee	instructor	2
Kita-kyushu	age	occupation before marriage	present occupation	child ren	Kita-kyushu	age	occupation before marriage	present occupation	child ren
A	20's	specialist	specialist (part-time)	0	H	40's	company employee	specialist (part-time)	2
B	30's	company employee	specialist	1	I	40's	company employee	association staff member (part-time)	3
C	30's	student	company employee	0	J	50's	family business	association staff member (part-time)	2
D	30's	part-time work	specialist	2	K	50's	company employee	part-time work	2
E	30's	company employee	company employee	1	L	50's	company employee	full-time housewife	2
F	40's	company employee	family business	1	M	50's	company employee	association staff member	2
G	40's	part-time work	association staff member (part-time)	4	N	60's	teacher	civil servant	5

4. Women's Views towards the Division of Gender Roles

In this section, we show the answers to the question about the ideal image of marriage that women had before getting married and the reality after getting married.

Firstly, we found that, on the whole, the women we interviewed did not have clear image of role-sharing between a couple before marriage. They took it for granted that a wife plays the role of family caretaker. The following are comments made by our interviewees:

“My mother was stay-at-home mom, and I never questioned it, and I thought I would be like her as a matter of course.” (Mrs. F in Tokyo)

“My mother-in-law never asked her son to help with housework. He couldn't do anything around the house, and I didn't expect him to do house chores.” (Mrs. G in Kumamoto)

Secondly, after getting married, too, many women did not enthusiastically support the division of gender roles, but accepted it as a matter of course.

“My husband spends much less time on child-care and housework than I do, but I have nothing to complain about.” (Mrs. B in Tokyo)

“I am a full-time housewife, and after all, a woman is in charge of household chores.” (Mrs. H in Kitakyushu)

Even if they were dissatisfied to some extent with their husband's little contribution to housework, they seemed to accept it by making allowances for their husbands' hard work.

“My husband is working hard from early in the morning to late at night, so I cannot ask him to participate in the housework.” (Mrs. L in Tokyo)

“If I had a job, I would ask my husband to share the housework. But I became a full-time housewife, and I know how busy he is.” (Mrs. I in Kumamoto)

On the other hand, some women clearly expressed dissatisfaction with the fixed idea of the traditional division of household responsibilities.

“A man may believe that he helps his wife a lot with the housework, but in fact he only does some of it. I don't think it is fair.” (Mrs. K in Tokyo)

“I have a full-time job and earn as much money as my husband does, but my husband doesn't do anything at home. It really irritates me.” (Mrs. J in Kumamoto)

Only four women told us that their husbands perform household tasks fifty-fifty or more. Other eight women reported “my husband often helps me with the housework”, whereas the rest of women reported “my husband does not participate in housework.”

Most of them seemed to accept the role of housekeeper without hesitation, but some women felt frustrated by the fact that they had to take charge of almost all household chores. Although there were some variations in terms of attitudes toward domestic work, as a whole they agreed that housework remains their responsibility. Even if a husband does not oppose his wife having a job, it does not mean he is going to participate in housework and child-care. Whether a husband takes part in housework or not, and whether a wife is satisfied with their arrangement or not, she is not able to get away from a role of the main housekeeper.

Why do women end up accepting the division of gender roles, even if they feel it is not fair? For one thing, it appeared that the respondents were more focused on a child-centred family life, rather than a husband-centred family life.

“I don't want to be a full-time housewife, but I want to be at home when my child comes back from school.” (Mrs. E in Tokyo)

"I think a mother should stay at home until her child grows up." (Mrs. I in Kumamoto)

"I understand some women want to continue their career after childbirth, but a baby needs his/her mother to stay with it, not a father." (Mrs. A in Kitakyushu)

We found that their acceptance of a full burden of domestic work was related to their strong sense of obligation associated with a maternal role. In other words, women accepted a gender role more as a mother rather than as a wife.

5. Women's Views towards the Advantages and Disadvantages of Marriage

The next section shows what women think about how they have benefited from marriage and what they put up with. Firstly, for the question about what they have benefited, the number who answered "having a child" was the highest. Subsequent benefits given were "economic stability", "family", "husband" and "mental stability".

"Before marriage, I was not interested in children, but now I am very happy to have children."
(Mrs. N in Tokyo)

"The happiest thing in my marriage life is that I gained children." (Mrs. L in Kitakyushu)

Women who answered "having a child" agreed that having a child is the essential part of their married life. This thinking is linked to the answer "economic stability" in the sense that women considered legal marriage as a precondition for having a child. In other words, marriage is an institution which provides a woman with an environment where she can raise her child without having serious financial difficulty.

"If you don't want to have a child, you have no reason to get married." (Mrs. I in Tokyo)

"I know that a single mother who has to earn her living to raise a child alone may face serious difficulties in her life. I think it's good to raise a child within a legal framework of the marriage system." (Mrs. J in Tokyo)

"I don't care much about a husband, but I wanted to have a child. That's why I needed to get married." (Mrs. M in Tokyo)

On the other hand, women who answered "husband" tended to refer to "a good relationship with husband", not just to "having a husband," as an advantage of marriage as follows:

"Although we are married for 26 years, there was a time we did not even want to speak to each other. However, as we overcame this difficult time, it was good that we came to understand each other." (Mrs. I in Tokyo)

"Unfortunately we lost our child, but this painful experience helped us develop strong ties and a deeper relationship." (Mrs. I in Kitakyushu)

The presence of a "child" itself may bring a sense of well-being to women. Compared to that, a "husband" may be considered to be beneficial if the couple gets along well with each other and if he provides "economic stability" and "mental stability" for his wife and children.

Secondly, when asked what they put up with in the marriage, women's answers focused on a husband's attitudes, especially on a "husband's control over me" and on a "husband's non-participation in housework and child-care". Following these answers came, "no time for my own affairs", "being forced to quit/ change my job." Examples of a "husband's control" are shown as below:

"I got slapped by my husband once or twice when we quarrelled. I was wondering if I should get divorce." (Mrs. H in Kitakyushu)

"My husband doesn't want me to go out when his friends visit our house. I am often forced to stay at home." (Mrs. N in Kitakyushu)

Although the former example is a sign of domestic violence, the respondent stopped short of getting divorce because she was pregnant at that time.

Moreover, a “husband’s non-participation in housework and child-care” indicates frustration caused by the fact that a wife handles most of the household work as well as child care and that her husband does not question that arrangement at all.

“After my husband had changed his jobs from office worker to self-employed, he said that he had no time left for housework. Then, I gave up asking him to help me.” (Mrs. A in Tokyo)

“My husband never lifts a finger at home. I got frustrated, so I left home with children for a while. But he didn’t really care much, and we did the same thing again and again. Eventually, I gave up expecting him to change.” (Mrs. I in Kumamoto)

Wives’ dissatisfaction and frustration may cause tension between a couple, but it seems that they have gradually reconciled themselves to the division of gender roles, rather than making an effort to change husbands’ attitudes. Similarly, their dissatisfaction in terms of “being forced to quit/ change my job” also became acceptable to them.

“I felt regret that I quit my job after childbirth, but in fact, after quitting, I felt comfortable with being away from work.” (Mrs. K in Tokyo)

“Every time I remember quitting my job, I felt I shouldn’t have got married. But recently I realised that I should be at home when my family needs me.” (Mrs. N in Kitakyushu)

6. Women’s Views towards Equal Partnership between Husband and Wife

As shown earlier, the marriage system which is based on the superior-subordinate relationship between husband and wife has been the main issue in question from the perspective of women’s studies in Japan. In order to establish an equal relationship among a couple, feminists agree that this fixed division of gender roles should be broken

up. However, do women in general agree with such an idea? Do they consider that equal partnership is necessary to a successful married life?

The views of women in our study on the definition of equal partnership varied greatly, and were broadly divided into three separate perspectives. The first definition was “being economically equal”:

“After spending many years as a full-time housewife, I began to work and get some income, so now I am equal with my husband.” (Mrs. N in Tokyo)

“My image of equal partnership is not only the husband but also the wife has economic power.” (Mrs. L in Kitakyushu)

The second definition was “saying to each other anything they want to say/ arguing with each other/ discussing with each other.”

“I think if neither I nor my husband hesitates to say what we really want to say each other, it means that we have an equal relationship.” (Mrs. B in Tokyo)

“We can discuss openly and decide anything together, if we are equal partners.” (Mrs. C in Kumamoto)

The third definition was “helping each other with compassion/ respecting each other.”

“I think if a couple achieves a caring relationship, it means they are equal.” (Mrs. I in Tokyo)

“The most ideal couple would be a couple in which husband and wife convey respect and gratitude for each other.” (Mrs. A in Kitakyushu)

In addition, some expressed the view that the division of gender roles could help build an equal partnership. In line with this thinking, some respondents insisted that a husband and a wife were equal from a human relations perspective because they played

different roles, making use of respective gender-specific characteristics.

Under existing circumstances where the average wage of women is only 70% of that of men, if a husband and a wife try to share the financial burden equally, the wife must work longer hours. Additionally, if she accepts the conventional notion that women should take responsibility for managing a household including child-rearing, she has to bear a heavier burden. This might explain why roughly one third of our respondents referred to a good quality of relationships with husbands, not to economic contribution, to define equal partnership.

Next, we asked women if they wanted to have an “equal” relationship with their husbands: if they care about whether their relationship is equal or not and whether they think equality is necessary for successful partnership. Women’s perspectives are roughly divided into three groups. The first group consists of women who considered that they had achieved an “equal” partnership as a result of their intentions and efforts.

“We often had a heated discussion because we say too much to each other. But we can keep being equal in the end. If one of us restrains a feeling too much, our equal relationship won’t last long.”
(Mrs. D in Kitakyushu)

“We’ve been equal for years, even during the time I was a full-time housewife. I’ve been doing my best to support my husband as a wife and as a mother.” (Mrs. M in Kitakyushu)

The second group supports an idea that a married couple does not need to be “equal”.

“I think we don’t need to be equal. I have a bit of a dominating character, so I should restrain myself and put my husband before myself to keep a good relationship.” (Mrs. B in Tokyo)

“A wife should pay due respect to her husband and put him a higher position in family (*otto wo tateru*), because a man has a mental weakness and his wife should cover it. If she does so, everything is running smoothly at home.” (Mrs. F in Tokyo)

“As a woman, I want to depend psychologically and financially on my husband. I wonder if it's unfair.” (Mrs. H in Kitakyushu)

It is worth noting that these women did not regard an “unequal” relationship as a master-subordinate relationship. In contrast, they consider that their “unequal” relationship functions well to keep their family running smoothly.

The third group consists of women who have mixed feelings. They want to have an “equal” relationship with their husband, but in fact, they restrain themselves and comply with their husbands' decision preferentially.

“We are equal in the sense that I earn as much money as my husband does. But we are not equal at all in the home. He is relaxed and watching a TV while I am cooking, cleaning, taking care of our children.” (Mrs. J in Kumamoto)

“I want to have an equal relationship, but my husband believes that a man and a woman have different roles. When I have difficulty in balancing work and housework, he suggests that I leave the office earlier, but never offers to help with housework.” (Mrs. C in Kitakyushu)

Although these women did not strongly oppose housewifely and maternal roles played, they did feel conflict or uncertainty with regard to their relationship with their husbands. We found that some of the women, especially who had a full-time job, felt uncomfortable or dissatisfied with their husbands who had no doubts about their wives bearing the full burden of household affairs. These women sought some sort of change in the fixed division of gender roles and the unequal relationship associated with it.

7. Conclusion

Principally, our findings demonstrate that women tended to internalise a strong awareness of their maternal roles and to a greater or lesser extent, to accept the division of gender roles voluntarily. Many women found the greatest meaning of marriage is to bear a child and secure an environment where they were able to raise a child. Even if

they felt dissatisfied with their married life and roles in some respects, it was likely that women's strong sense of responsibility toward their family and home led to their accommodation to traditional housewifery and maternal roles after all.

The division of gender roles between a husband and a wife was no longer recognised as a system to strongly suppress and constrain women. Instead, women thought that the division of gender roles could be compatible with equal partnership between a husband and a wife. Even if a woman answered that husband and wife should not be "equal", it does not necessarily mean that she agreed with the superior-subordinate relationship between husband and wife. To put it differently, they thought that they skillfully managed to maintain a well-balanced relationship by putting their husband before themselves.

Thus, in our study, the relationship between husband and wife based on the traditional view of the gendered division of labour was seen as a system in which many women were able to gain economic as well as mental stability. In most cases, it seems difficult at the moment to find any persuasive reason for destroying the system.

Nevertheless, this paper also shows a sign of change in the traditional relationship between married couples in Japanese society. Although most women basically accepted the division of gender roles, it does not mean that they did not expect their husbands to participate in housework and child-rearing at all. The mother-centred family system has remained firm, but the idea that fathers need to participate in child-rearing has become commonplace. Presently, it is normal for married women to have a job. At the same time, earning money may give wives some confidence that they can establish a fifty-fifty relationship with their husbands. This kind of thinking applied to some respondents to this survey.

Consequently, in order to achieve a gender equal society, what may be needed next is a solution to issues regarding husbands, namely, the realisation of their responsibility toward their family life as well as more active participation in housework and child-rearing. Moreover, it is important that society accepts men's greater involvement in

family life.

Finally, the results obtained from the survey did not indicate as many regional differences as we had expected in views about the division of gender roles and equal partnership at least in this survey.

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