

Abstract

Japan, moving forward and backward repeatedly, has made little progress towards realization of a gender-equal society. However, the legal system to realize a gender-equal society, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Act for Men and Women enacted in 1985, has developed steadily. The Basic Act for Gender-Equal Society enacted in 1999 aims to realize a society in which everyone, regardless of gender, is respected as an individual. The Act aims to achieve this by breaking down the fixed view of the division of gender roles, such as, men should work outside the home while women should do all the housework, which exists not only in workplaces but also in homes and communities. At a glance, it appears while women's participation in society has been promoted, men's participation in housework has also been increasing. However, in reality, looking at the World Economic Forum's gender gap index score, Japan was ranked 104th out of 142 countries in the world (2014). Although it went up from 105th in 2013, this is still a low position. The main reason for Japan's lower ranking is the unchanging view throughout society about the division of gender roles.

What is closely associated with the fixed idea about the division of gender roles is the Japanese way of marriage. There still remains the role models of a husband as an "income earner" and a "person who supports his family", while a wife is a "dependent spouse" or a "person who manages a household." Now marriage is one of life's options in life, not the only option. Nevertheless, in Japan, there is no change in the marriage system nor in the division of gender roles. Specifically, the number of women who continue working after childbirth has not really increased. Moreover, husbands' participation in housework and child-rearing has not advanced. At least during the child-raising period, an overwhelming majority of married couples' division of labor is based on the fixed view of the division of gender roles. In other words, the traditional form of a married couple, "a husband should work outside the home, while a wife should do all the housework," remains almost unshaken.

Given this background, we examined the following points: what women want from marriage; what they gained from marriage; how they think about the division of gender roles; and how they define equality between a husband and a wife. Presumably, one of the reasons why the traditional ways of marriage still remain deeply rooted is that women themselves support those ways. Therefore, we conducted an interview survey with 40 married women for the purpose of finding out the reason why marriages continue to be based on a fixed view of the division of gender roles. The survey method was semi-

structured interviews based on the personal connection method.

The main questions they were asked to answer were as follows: how and why they got married; their ideal image of marriage before getting married vs. the reality after getting married; how they have benefited from marriage and what they put up with; and how they think about equal partnership between a husband and a wife. Survey targets ranged from those aged around thirty to those in their 60s, considering that respondents should have a certain number of years of marriage. In order to examine whether there were any differences in views about marriage between urban and rural areas, and, if any, what the difference it is, we sought cooperation from residents in Tokyo and the Kyushu region (Kitakyushu City and Kumamoto City) as respondents. We chose the Kyushu region based on the assumption that “local people tend to take a more positive stance toward marriage.” Moreover, Kyushu is generally recognized as a region where the consciousness about gender norms as well as the predominance of men over women remains strong. In addition, there are more bridal magazines issued in Kyushu than in other regions. 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.

The analysis of survey results is shown below: The answers to the question about the ideal image of marriage they had before getting married showed that they had a less clearer image of marriage than we had expected. For the question about what they gained from marriage, they answered “economic stability”, “mental stability”, and “child(ren)”. In particular, the rate of those who answered “having a child” was remarkably high.

Regarding their views about the division of gender roles, there was a difference in the level of acceptance between those who positively accepted the view, and those who could not help but accept it given their actual situation. In either case, many women seemed to accept the view as such. It also appeared that the respondents were also more focused on a child-centered family life, rather than a husband-centered family life. In other words, women accepted a gender role as a mother vs. that of a wife. It was also found that they considered legal marriage as a precondition for having a child.

For the last question about equality between husbands and wives, many women, while accepting a division of gender roles, never accepted a master-subordinate relationship with their husbands. The respondents had a desire to build an equal partnership with their husbands. However, their views about the definition of equal partnership varied greatly, and were broadly divided into three separate perspectives:

“being economically equal”; “saying to each other anything they want to say / arguing with each other / discussing with each other”; and “helping each other with compassion / respecting each other.” Moreover, some expressed their views 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.

As shown above, the results obtained from the survey did not indicate as many regional differences as we had expected. There were little differences in women’s views among age groups and occupations (e.g., between regular employees and non-regular employees, or between specialist jobs and general duties). This means there were little regional, age and occupational differences in views about the division of gender roles and equal partnership at least in this survey. Principally, women tended to internalize a strong awareness of their maternal roles and accept the division of gender roles voluntarily to a greater or lesser extent. Many women found the greatest meaning of marriage to be having a child and securing an environment where they were able to raise a child.

The division of gender roles between a husband and a wife was no longer recognized 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. The relationship between husband and wife based on the traditional view of the division of gender roles that men should work outside the home while women should do all the housework became a system in which many women were able to gain economic as well as mental stability. In most cases, it seemed difficult at the moment to find any persuasive reason for destroying the system. On the other hand, the survey results revealed the existence of women who felt conflict or uncertainty, or who sought a change.

It is noteworthy that wives, mostly those who had a job, felt uncomfortable or dissatisfied with their husbands who had no doubts about their wives bearing the full burden of household affairs. Although most women basically accepted the division of gender roles, there were a few wives who did not expect their husbands to participate in housework and child-rearing at all. The mother-centered family system has still stayed firm, while the idea that fathers need to participate in child-rearing has become commonplace. Under the 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. However, 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. The survey also showed that women felt a strong sense of responsibility to their family and home, while being highly motivated to get a job. In order to balance work with family life, many women chose flexible ways of working after marriage by obtaining a qualification, starting their own business, etc. Finally, in order to achieve a gender equal society, what may be needed next is the solution of issues regarding husbands, namely, the realization of their responsibility toward their family life as well as more active participation in housework and child-rearing. Moreover, it is important that society accept men's greater involvement in family life.