

Raising Children and Gender-Based Roles — Case Study in China — Keiko OHAMA (China)

Thirty years have passed since the inauguration of the China's One-Child Policy, which was adopted concurrently with the Open Door Policy. Children who were born under the One-Child Policy are now becoming parents. During those decades, urban residents' lifestyles have changed radically, along with their approaches to childbearing and raising children. According to the statistics of Beijing City, where I now live, the average age of women at childbirth was 28.83 years in 2005, 1.5 years higher than the level in 2000. According to the same statistical survey, the City's birth ratio declined to 0.68, a level even lower than that of Japan. The tendency to delay marriage and limit the number of children is even more remarkable in Beijing than in Japan.

Since the 1950s, under the socialist regime the Chinese government has encouraged women to work outside the home. To that end, the government presented a new family model featuring husband and wife who both have occupations. To ensure that women can continue to work - even after marriage and childbearing - until they reach the mandatory age of retirement, the Chinese government has taken various supportive measures. For instance, the government has promoted "equal pay for equal work" for both men and women workers, reinforced special protective programs for women in the "five periods" (menstruation, pregnancy, delivery, breast nursing and menopause), and enriched childcare services at childcare centers/kindergarten. With such support programs, women in their 20s to 40s (the child-raising period) began to continue working, a change that resulted in a higher rate of women joining the labor force. In fact, up until the 1990s, over 90% of Chinese women joined the labor force, a level almost equivalent to that of men. Even today, the rate is among the highest in the world; China is recognized as an advanced Asian nation in terms of housework sharing between men and women.

Is China also advanced in terms of gender equality in parental roles?

According to the existing labor law, working women are allowed to take 90 days' maternity leave. To promote the One-Child Policy, an additional 30 days' leave is granted to couples who delay marriage (until 25 years of age for men and 23 years for women) and who delay the birth of their first child until wife is 24 years old. The law stipulates that either wife or husband can take this (additional) leave, but in actuality only a few men take it. Most men take a leave of absence for about a week at the longest,

around the time of birth. Despite the common image of Chinese husbands, who are eager to fulfill housework responsibilities, most Chinese men are conservative regarding gender roles as pertains to parental responsibilities.

Women working at public organizations, schools and other workplaces where socialistic tradition is maintained can usually take a six-month maternity leave. In addition, such women are allowed to limit their work hours for one year, in order to take care of their babies. Accordingly, at many workplaces we see mothers leave around 4:00 p.m. to take their children home from childcare centers. Although this may give the impression that Chinese workplaces are friendly to working mothers, in actuality, increasing numbers of workplaces have begun to limit their number of female staff, in order to secure profitability. Currently, the sharp decline in the number of female workers is emerging as a serious social problem.

Meanwhile, in view of the rapid spread of the market economy and the rationalization of individual businesses, female staff in competitive workplaces cannot take even the 90 days maternity leave that they are eligible to take by law. In many cases, such women must seek assistance from their mothers or mothers-in-law, asking them to stay in the same house to take care of their infants. Because of the heavy dual responsibility at home and in the workplace, increasing numbers of Chinese women have begun to prefer being full-time housewives, rather than working mothers. On the other hand, many well-to-do women hire housekeepers, in addition to seeking assistance from their mothers. To resume working shortly after childbirth, such women share childcare responsibilities with their mothers and housekeepers.

Since the 20th century, China has developed a childcare system that imposes heavier responsibility on women. Women's responsibility has even been reinforced by various complex factors, including rapid development of the market economy since the 1980s, spread of the One-Child Policy and the widened economic gap between urban and rural areas. In addition to immobilizing gender gaps, these factors have also worked to widen social gaps among women of diverse classes.

Among the various groups that called for improvement of this situation, the first to speak out was a group at the Women's Studies Center at the Central Party School of the Communist Party. In view of the magnitude of the problem, this group advocates that the Social Insurance Law to be enacted this year should stipulate that paid childcare

leave should be provided for male workers, so as to encourage men to fulfill their parental roles.

I believe that the commitment of this group is effective in mitigating present-day gender discrimination in relation to raising children, and will be an important step toward building a gender-equal society.