

# **Organizing discourses around family before and after the International Year of the Family**

## **—Basic research for international comparison—**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to describe transformations in the levels of interest in family and the forms/functions of family during the period that marked the establishment of the International Year of the Family (IYF) in 1989—a symbolic event that reflected increased international interest in the family. This study aims to describe these transformations in interest by organizing discourses on the family studies carried out during this period.

The present study has focused on the IYF while examining common discourses within international comparative research in both developed and developing countries. We have found few detailed materials written in Japanese about the IYF, and even less research on the IYF; the current research situation in this field is unknown. In a context in which policies are debated on the premise that “the family constitutes the basic unit of society” across countries, the present study is based on the following questions: 1) Why did the family become an “issue of international concern” during this time? 2) What was the purpose of the IYF? (in Japan, there was less interest in the IYF than in the International Women’s Year; the IYF was misunderstood as “an orientation towards the patriarchal three-generation family;” 3) If the IYF occurred in response to issues surrounding the family during this period, what changes in “the state of the family” gave rise to this event?

The research method applied in this study follows trends in the discourse by presenting hypotheses pertaining to the state of the family, an issue of concern at the time; it also organizes family-studies discourses and conducts a document analysis of the United Nations (UN) resolutions and meeting records prior to 1989, the year the IYF was established. Specifically, based on the organization of discourses in family studies, we hypothesize that the establishment of the IYF was based on the following factors: 1) a heightened interest in power relations within the family and the gendered division of labor, and 2) transformations in the forms of family, individualization, closeness between members, functions of the family, same-sex partnerships, and the need to respond to such transformations.

First, to explain how the family became a matter of international concern, we have explored the effect of heightened feminist movements and responses to change, in the form of family, functions,

closeness, and individualization, as argued in the family-studies literature. However, our findings indicate that, at the source, there was concern about social development, originating from the principle of human-rights protection, first promoted by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in the UN resolution, “World Social Development” (adopted in 1978), based on the Declaration on Social Progress and Development (adopted in 1969), which subsequently led to the UN resolution “Implementation of the Declaration on Social Progress and Development” (adopted in 1979). The present study shows that the relationship between the IYF and other international “years,” including United Nations Decade for Women, World Assembly on Ageing, the International Year for Disabled Persons, and the International Year of The Child, derived from a common foundation, namely efforts related to the International Covenants on Human Rights and the Declaration on Social Progress and Development; these years are like branches and leaves growing from the same trunk and roots.

Second, the present study shows that the purpose of the IYF, based on its principles, was “to raise awareness of issues related to the family, which is a source of wellbeing for each family member.” We argue that there was a need to focus on “family” to ensure the comprehensive inclusion of women, disabled persons, senior citizens, and children—whose inclusion into policy had been fragmented—as the beneficiaries of development. This came about following the emergence of a stance that prioritized “economic development accompanied by social development and the integration and participation of youth and women,” underlined by the principle that “the ultimate goal of development is the continuous improvement of the wellbeing of all through participation in every step of development and the fair distribution of profits.” Thus, the purpose of the event was not to promote “an orientation towards the patriarchal three-generation family.”

Third, to explain transformations in the state of the family that led to the establishment of the IYF, the present study shows that UN discussions recognized emerging changes in family size (shrinkage), family lifecycles, and the role of the family amidst capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization, brought about by development and progress, in both developed and developing countries. Specifically, we show that, as developed and developing countries coped with the economic slowdown caused by the two oil crises by reforming the welfare state and implementing liberalization, these changes led to concerns about social development retreat, and particularly the weakening of the function of family in developing countries. This, in turn, led to heightened concerns about family wellbeing, which resulted in the establishment of the IYF.

Finally, the present study offers insights into modern Japan from the perspective of the IYF, which promotes a comprehensive approach toward improving the wellbeing of individuals and families. We have highlighted the adverse effects of the Japanese welfare system, which presumes that the family is the main caretaker, and the fixed gender roles within it, as demonstrated by the double-care

issue. This study also explores the design of a social-service system reliant on a family model that dismisses the families of disabled persons; and a vertically-segmented government administration that treats childrearing and senior care as separate matters.