

Locating Family in the Gender Equality Politics

- A Focus on Economic Situation after Divorce in Japan -

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Synopsis

The family system is one of the subsystems of the Japanese society in which gender equality has hardly been achieved. This paper discusses the current state of gender equality focusing on women’s economic disadvantage in post-divorce life and on public discourses that legitimates the gender-unequal family system.

1 Gender gap in post-divorce life

Population of divorced or never-married people has increased in Japan. How has this change influenced economic gender gap?

Data: National Family Research of Japan (NFRJ) 1999–2009 [1].

Method: ANOVA and regression analysis.

Focus: Equivalent income (annual household income adjusted for the size of the household).

Result 1: The economic gender gap appears among those who experienced divorce or widowhood.

Result 2: Divorced women tend to be in a disadvantageous situation due to three factors: (1) lower education levels, (2) smaller probability of continuing regular employment, and (3) higher probability of taking custody of young children.

These results show that the family system, in particular the legal system of marriage and divorce, is responsible for economic gender inequality. Along with the growing population of divorced people, there may be increasing probability at which a woman experience disadvantageous situation.

2 CEDAW and gender-mainstreaming in Japan

Japan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 and has subsequently introduced law/policy reforms aiming at gender equality. How these reforms have incorporated equalization of family?

Data: Governmental documents [2] [3].

Method: Literature survey.

Result 1: The documents include no systematic examination about the impact that reforms of the family system will have on gender equality.

Result 2: The government, as well as the public, locates the matters of working condition and social security in the center of gender equality policy.

Result 3: The second and subsequent revisions of *Basic Plan for Gender Equality* (2005, 2010, 2015) give some favorable account of traditional social order based on biological sex differences, as a compromise with criticism from the right wing [3].

Japanese gender equality policy has not had systematic description on how family creates inequality and what reform is needed for equality. It is rather inclined to consider traditional social function of family as compatible with gender equality.

3 Falling into the chasm between tradition and modernity

Discourses about Japanese family are divided into two schools. One advocates the traditional stem family based on so-called “ie” system, while the other advocates the modern family based on a triad of an equal couple and their child. What these discourses imply to reforms of the system of marriage and divorce?

Method: Discourse analysis

Data: Legal/political discourses about family in Japan.

Result 1: Traditional thought about family has strong political influence on policy-making.

Result 2: Authors advocating modern family always argue for the equality between couple, but rarely substantiate it to realize distributive justice in the family.

Result 3: Argument about law reforms for equitable divorce is limited to a small group of legal scholars.

Even today, the traditional thought about the “ie” family system is supported by the public opinion. Family policies of the government are under the influence of the “ie” ideology. It may be part of the reason why reforms of the family system have not been oriented to equal distribution among the members.

On the other hand, the modern thought advocates equality among family members. However, this does not necessarily imply that public policy should enforce equality on family. The modern family ideology assumes mutual altruism between the husband and the wife and one-way altruism from them to their children, as if their altruistic relationship has already achieved equality among them. Although there has been a long history of argument by family law scholars for enforcement of equal distribution through divorce, the hegemonic discourse on family is reluctant to adopt this argument.

4 Conclusion

Statistical findings exhibit that gender inequality grows in family life and becomes visible after divorce. The findings show the family system’s fault for unequal distribution. However, gender equality discourses have not addressed reform of the family system. That may be because family is regarded as an autonomous and private group that should be free from public control, in both of the traditional and modern perspectives. The family system has thus been ignored in the politics of gender equality.

Acknowledgement

The data for this secondary analysis, National Family Research of Japan 1998 (NFRJ98), 2003 (NFRJ03), and 2008 (NFRJ08) by the NFRJ Committee, Japan Society of Family Sociology, was provided by the Social Science Japan Data Archive, Center for Social Research and Data Archives, Institute of Social Science, The University of Tokyo.

References

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