



Don't you buy Womenomics?

IWAMA Yoko, Professor of International Relations, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

Don't you buy Womenomics?" Asked this question by an English man in Tokyo, I answered right back, "No, I don't." I replied in this manner because a "consciousness revolution" of the roles played by men and women in society and family is required if we are to change their roles in the economy. However, I sense that the chances of this happening under the leadership of the current Liberal Democratic Party are extremely limited. For the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP), family is still an important concept, and in fact the majority of party lawmakers support the old concept of family based on the traditional division of labor between men and women, despite their lip service of encouraging women to work outside the home.



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Let's look at an example. In September 2013, the Supreme Court handed down an opinion stating for the first time that the provision of the Civil Code stipulating that the right of inheritance of a child born out of wedlock is one half that of a child born in wedlock is illegal and invalid because it violates Article 14, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution of Japan, which guarantees equality before the law. The facts that this provision had remained in effect until recently and that it took such a long time to rule it unconstitutional in Japan, believed to be a developed country, may be surprising in itself. (The Supreme Court ruled it constitutional several times in the past.) Bias and discrimination against having a child outside of marriage still remain deeply rooted in Japanese society. The Civil Code is actually concerned that a married man will have a relationship with another woman and have a child with that woman, and then makes the value judgment that the man, the woman and indeed their child should be sanctioned.

Criticism against the judgment of the Supreme Court is strong within the LDP. There is much critique in the conservative wing of the LDP, including those who see the judgment as undermining the status of a legal wife, or endangering the institution of marriage, or even leading to the breakdown of the family. Although the Civil Code has finally been amended, revision of the Family Register Act was postponed and a working team to protect the rights of a wife has been set up within the LDP. Yagi Hidetsugu, a professor at Takasaki City University of Economics, who criticizes the judgment of the Supreme Court in the November 2013 issue of the monthly magazine *SEIRON* is seen as close to Prime Minister Abe



Shinzo. These critics do not believe in the idea that children are not responsible for the circumstances under which their parents gave birth to them and therefore should not be affected by the status of their parents. In Japanese society today, common-law marriage, divorce, children born out of wedlock, single mothers and single fathers are all increasingly prevalent, and there are cases in which a person is married more than once, including both a legal marriage as well as a common-law marriage. The concept of family and the way of life of individuals are diversifying. Nevertheless, conservatives ignore these facts and stick fast to the traditional concept of family, where people are basically married only once and a family consists of a husband, wife and several children. As the Japanese social security system is also designed on this assumption it is unable to respond to social changes, resulting in a large number of “family refugees,” argues Yamada Masahiro, a professor at Chuo University.

A similar set of values is also visible in the LDP's stance on separate family names for married couples. In Japanese society, it is still considered commonplace for women when they get married to abandon their family name and adopt their husband's family name. The reverse is called *mukoyoshi*, which refers to a man who has married into his wife's family and it is believed to be an exceptional emergency measure to preserve the family name of his wife. In this case, the man is regarded as paying a considerable sacrifice. This is another of those residual systems of the days when people married only once and the marriage meant that a woman became a member of the family of her husband. The Legislative Council of the Ministry of Justice submitted a report in 1996 saying that the Civil Code should be revised to permit different surnames for married couples, namely system that allows a man and a woman when they marry to either each keep their own surname or to follow the single-surname policy. Although there have been several attempts to revise the Civil Code, it has consistently failed in the face of conservative opposition. As a consequence, working women continue to use their maiden name informally (but have to use their husband's family name for legal documents) or, if they do not want to legally change their family name, they have to choose a common-law marriage and give up various preferential legal and tax treatments provided for married women under the current legal system. You may encounter a person who claims that common-law marriage today enjoys similar benefits to legal marriage, but do not believe him. For example, many banks will only grant mortgage loans to couples in a legal marriage and will not lend to those in a common-law marriage. A couple in a common-law marriage in Japanese society today will encounter surprising number of discriminations, which put women under pressure to enter into a legal marriage in every possible instance.

Let's go back to Womenomics. For women to participate actively in the economy and take on leading positions, it will not be enough to have a nursery school to meet their childcare needs. In the first place, it is impossible to have a nursery school take on all the roles that a full-time housewife plays. I will discuss this subject another time, but government policies for women are excessively concentrated on the issue of children on waiting lists for nursery schools. They are preoccupied with the illusion that women's participation in society will become possible as soon as this problem is solved. It is impossible for women to participate in society as actively as men unless men are ready to equally share the burden with women in the home. Otherwise, women will be unable to escape the choice between a career and childcare unless they have a beneficent



and healthy mother living close by who will take on the burden caring for her grandchildren. As far as I know, there is no sign of the Abe administration trying to play a leading role in guiding this sort of consciousness revolution.

Another solution is to procure inexpensive domestic labor. Back in the days when Japan was poor, the use of a domestic worker to care for the kids and do the housework was common in middle-class families. It was usual in an urban middle-class family to have an unmarried young woman living in the family's house and working as a domestic helper. In *The Little House*, a movie that recently won best supporting actress at the Berlin Film Festival, was a woman in exactly such a position. However, this option disappeared as Japan grew richer and older, with an equalizing effect on the households. Try and legally hire a domestic helper in Japan today and it will cost you at least 300,000 yen a month. Only wealthy families could afford such an outlay. Also, many families simply do not have the extra space for a live-in helper. Again, only wealthy families would have the extra room for a domestic helper. In the current era, importing labor from developing countries appears to be the only way to lower the unit price of domestic labor. However, a full discussion on this issue has yet to begin.

Foreign labor has begun entering Japan to work on agriculture and construction industry job sites and it seems impossible to turn back this trend. Employment in nursing care of the elderly is likely to come next, as it seems impossible for young people in Japan to take care of the increasing number of older persons.

Consequently, employment in childcare and housework will have a much lower priority. To begin with, these areas are not attractive to job seekers or to politicians looking for votes, as the number of children is decreasing. As a result, working mothers in Japan will have to come to terms with a situation in which they will have to keep up their superhuman efforts or else come to terms with the fact that for a long time to come, they will be unable to perform at their best. They will keep on making compromise after compromise while living with the agony that no one is listening to them.

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IWAMA Yoko

Professor of International Relations, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)
Graduated from Kyoto University in 1986 and earned her Ph.D. in Law at the University. Served as Research Assistant of Kyoto University (1994–97), Special Assistant of the Japanese Embassy in Germany (1998–2000) and Associate Professor at GRIPS (2000). Professor since 2009. Her specialty is international security and European diplomatic history. She has served on numerous government committees including the Council on Reconstruction of a Legal Basis for Security (2006-7, 2013-).
