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The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility

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The industrial world is ageing radically. Population ageing has been particularly dramatic in post-industrial East Asian economies in terms of its pace and path. Having reached the replacement level of the total fertility rate (TFR) in the mid-1970s, Japan has been an 'aged' society since 1996 with more than 14 percent of the population aged over 65. In 2004, the TFR of Japan reached 1.29, the lowest in its history. Indeed, over the past decade sub-replacement fertility has become the norm across East Asia. Besides Japan, the former NIEs (Newly Industrialized Economies) such as South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong have also fallen into the 'lowest-low fertility' group (Kohler, Ortega, Billari 2001), where the average number of children born to a reproductive woman is less than 1.3.

However, decreasing childbearing rates is not the sole reason for the sustained fertility decline and the radical ageing process that seems to be plaguing the post-industrial societies of Asia. The principal issue is the radical transformation in women's decision-making on family formation and childbearing that has come about in the highly industrialized, yet conservative, Confucian societies such as Japan. Of all industrial nations, Japan's ageing proves to be the most tricky to rationalize. As a consequence of having achieved core market economy status, displaying a low profile in terms of women's employment status, gender equality and equity in major industrial nations of East Asia have evolved as the central and contentious issues of development and welfare politics of the economies. Rosenbluth's edited volume on Japan's low fertility ambitiously attempts to identify such complexities both from women's perspectives, and, political and economical viewpoints.

The book focuses on the political and labor market systems that are essentially flawed vis-à-vis gender, which negatively affects the status of female workforce and fertility in the country. In the introduction, Rosenbluth states the very controversy underlying low fertility rates. Many young Japanese women who wish to pursue careers believe that a virtuous mother must stay at home until her child (ren) reaches school-going age. It is considered disgraceful if the mother does not comply, instead making her career her utmost priority (pp. 6-7). This indicates women's ambivalent position in Japan and the growing conflicts between self-aspirations and expectations, rooted in societal and institutional codes of a society where disciplined

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individuals' devotion to family and education is a universal virtue. The problem is that there is little room for compromise between these two big goals for women.

It is Rosenbluth's core argument that gender-friendly policies can enable women to balance family and career, eventually boosting fertility rates. This argument provides a critical clue on women's persistent preference for bearing fewer children in post-industrial Japan and in other advanced OECD economies (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). Over the last decade, lowest fertility rates among the industrial world have been uniquely prevalent in gender-divided, conservative economies such as Japan, South Korea, Italy and Spain. In contrast, more egalitarian and welfare-based economies of Northern Europe, where the female labor force participation rate has been constantly high, have experienced increasing fertility rates in recent years. Yet, there has been no study that explicitly pinpoints the peculiarity of sustained fertility drop in developed Asia in comparison to the developed west.

Rosenbluth's book has contributions by eight scholars from different disciplines – Sociology, Politics and Economics – and is fully engaged in discussing the unknown mechanisms of Japanese women's reluctance to bear children.

The seven core chapters of the three-part book are devoted to exploring the structural grounds of women's immutable struggles as workers and mothers within the institutional and value-imbued system of Japanese society.

Part I of the book includes Rosenbluth's introduction and Sawako Shirahase's statistical findings on the relationship between women's economic status and fertility. In the second chapter, Shirahase hints at why maintaining both economic activity and motherhood is particularly difficult for women in Japan than in similarly developed western economies. The statistically significant negative relationship between married women's income level and number of children in Shirahase's study suggests that family life is essentially incompatible with career success in Japan. In turn, Shirahase asserts that without reforming the existing labor market structure, which promotes gender gap in income and contribution of educational attainment to career (relative irrelevance of high qualifications of women for promotion) particularly in large firms, the relationship between female income power and fertility will remain negative.

Part II of the book examines various constraints imposed on the demand for female labor. Margarita Estevez-Abe points out the fundamental flaw of social welfare policy on gender that impedes skill-matching and secure employment of women. According to Estevez-Abe, true gender equality in advanced market economies must be understood in terms of the employment system that treat male and female workforce on identical terms. For Estevez-Abe, women in most developed states are systematically disadvantaged by the logic of gender bias in skill requirements and investments. Focus on firm-specific skills in established labor market institutions essentially discriminates against female workforce, as women with family responsibilities have less chance to achieve the core-worker status through lifetime commitment than their male cohort. Estevez-Abe suggests that seemingly women-friendly welfare policies such as equal opportunity law and generous leave of absence will not change the fundamental gender inequality problem of many advanced economies embedded in occupational segregation by gender. To summarize, the bias against female workers in the labor market institutions creates great uncertainty for women with respect to family formation and childbearing.

In a similar context, Mary Brinton, in Chapter 4 of the book, criticizes gender bias and ageism embedded in offices. This is particularly strong in East Asian economies such as Japan and South Korea compared to other liberal market economies of the west such as the US. Brinton argues that occupational segregation by gender and age withholds middle class and often college-educated married women from participating in the labor market and getting a core worker status. Employers' strong preference for 'young' and 'single' women in clerical work is a source of great pressure on women's decision to leave work to start a family. In Chapter 5, Eiko Kenjoh suggests an interesting solution for gender bias that is detrimental to the Japanese labor market system. According to Kenjoh, labor market and employment flexibility are vital in improving female employment conditions. Government of the lowest fertility economies such as Japan should promote diverse employment options available to women regardless of their age and marital status. Creating more skilled and better paid part-time jobs both for women and men can help lessen women's constraints on childbearing and eventually promote gender equality.

Contributions to Part III of the book are devoted to explaining the constraints on the supply side of female labor. Patria Boling attempts to clarify Japan's failure in increasing fertility rates. Boling accuses the government's long history of failing public welfare policies and in particular, subsidies for childcare. For Boling, increasing subsidies for working mothers may encourage women to bear more children.

In Chapter 7, Junnichi Wada also advocates more state funding for day care, which has been particularly weak in rural politics. Yet, without tackling gender discrimination in employment, increasing childcare subsidies alone may not significantly boost birth rates. In Chapter 8, Keiko Hirao describes the unique demand and pressure on Japanese mothers under the highly competitive education system of the society. Hirao points out that married women with children in Japan essentially confront double the challenges and constraints – privatized education market and detrimental employment system. Because a good education is highly valued by mothers in Japanese society, married women often volunteer for full-time commitment to childcare and education instead of participating in the labor market. Hirao's argument is upheld by the empirical evidence that there is an inverse correlation between the rates of higher college enrolment and 'Juku' (private cram schools) and maternal employment rate.

In the concluding chapter, Rosenbluth makes two highly feasible policy suggestions to the government of the liberal Japanese market economy. First, the government could provide incentives to fathers, including paternity leave that would allow them more time for their children, while reducing the differential costs in hiring men and women. However, men's attitude toward the cost of childcare is another variable to factor into changes in the fertility rates. Second, the government can use tax rates to discourage long work hours; the public may enable this by pressing political parties to consider the cost balance between childrearing and extended working hours.

The book makes an important contribution to studies of the post-industrial Japan's population dynamics. Empirical analyses of the volume go beyond the modernization-demographic transition theory. While studies on last century's global, and particularly Asian fertility trends have focused on the impacts of modernization, urban development, and (medical) technology on human reproductive behaviors, an understanding of sustained fertility decline in the 'post-industrial world' requires a more sophisticated and contextual analysis. Rosenbluth's volume provides a timely response to this need by considering the contested and institutional gender dynamism of ageing in Japan – a puzzling developed society, where an advanced capitalist

system and high gender inequity immutably coexist.

Although Rosenbluth's volume provides ample explanation for the mechanism of low fertility in Japan, the inclusion of certain other key issues would have provided a more complete view of the topic.

First, none of the contributors provided a parallel examination of the post-industrial South Korean demographic transition experience that has been most similar to the Japanese experience and is considered to be the most extreme among the ageing economies of the industrial world. Having reached the replacement-level fertility rate in the mid-1980s, birth rate in the country reached 1.16 in 2004 and dropped further to a record low fertility of 1.08 in 2005. Japan and South Korea – the only Asian and low-fertility developmental welfare economies of the OECD – share much in common in terms of their post-industrial social and demographic development paths. This is, for the most part, grounded on their unique post-modern Confucian value systems, where female autonomy and strong male chauvinism coexist. In both economies, welfare has evolved as a core political agenda only in the 1990s. Public and political perspectives on social policies shifted from ones that viewed social welfare as a subsidiary aspect of the developmental state to that of an expression of new citizenship in a post-industrial social context (Peng 2006:2). The recent political debate over female workforce and family welfare in both advanced market economies is seen as a deferred panic of the states over their deeply greying population. Consideration of a similarly conservative and controversial low-fertility economy such as South Korea would have made the volume's comparative analyses richer than that achieved by covering only liberal western developed welfare economies whose demographic transition and ageing experiences are relatively more straightforward and widely known.

Second, although it is clear that the focus of the book is low-fertility trend, it was surprising to find no mention of the impact of foreign migration on the country's extreme and intricate ageing process throughout the volume. Since the onset of the post-industrial demographic transition, the interplay between the shortage of domestic workforce supply and the demand for foreign migrant labor has been particularly difficult for Japan's political economy. The states' tardy response to the demand for immigration and female labor participation, and more recently to family welfare, must be addressed in the context of the nation's ageing dilemma. Japan's low-fertility issues greatly depend on how the state approaches problems associated with population ageing. As the one of the most homogeneous and gender-divided global core economies, the country is pressured into making a choice for its labor-hungry economy, by either advancing gender equity in the labor market or accepting immigration.

Third, the issue of gender and reproductive trends in the developed Japanese economy could have been more critically addressed in a 'gender-in-development' perspective. Murayama (2005), in his study on 'gender and development in Japan' lays out the lack of willingness and commitment on the part of Japanese women with regards to higher socio-economic mobility in the 'gendered society'. Indeed, women in all of the economically developed yet highly gendered societies such as Japan, South Korea, Italy, and Spain are victims of the long-lasting failure of the male-perspective-driven welfare systems. Japan has long been considered a developed nation, yet in terms of social security and welfare, the world's second largest economy after the United States remains underdeveloped (Low 2002). Indeed, the failure in boosting childbearing and female status in the labor market in Japan needs to be considered in a wider – social and welfare – development context.

Despite its limitations, the book provides one of the most comprehensive and updated analyses of ageing in post-industrial Japan in existing literature. In doing so, it also sheds new light on what may be called the 'lowest-low fertility dilemma' – low female labor participation and low(est) fertility – that has been prevailing across conservative (e.g., Confucian, Catholic) societies of the industrialized world since the end of the twentieth century.

The volume's most salient contribution to the existing literature on Japanese ageing is that it has illuminated the controversy over women's highly demanding and pressured roles as a super-mum and a super-educator of children, a super-wife, and a super-worker in the Confucian value-orientated Japanese and East Asian developed economies that have largely remained a myth to Western researchers.

This book would be of particular use to research students and scholars working on East Asian population dynamics, gerontology, welfare politics as well as women's studies.

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