

Forging *Ikumen* in Japan: On state efforts to change gender roles *

Mala Htun[†]

Francesca R. Jensenius[‡]

Melanie Sayuri Dominguez[§]

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Abstract

The Japanese state has adopted numerous policies and programs to change traditional gender roles in order to boost women’s labor force participation and raise the birth rate, including the *ikumen*—or active father—project to encourage more men to take paternity leave. In this paper, we draw on surveys conducted between 2000 and 2014, as well as three dozen interviews, to explore whether and how government policy has been accompanied by changes in social attitudes and practices. We find significant changes to attitudes about gender roles and men’s contributions, but far less change to working habits and the sexual division of labor. State efforts have produced only an “incomplete revolution,” as a constellation of economic, social, and legal institutions continue to encourage traditional gender roles. Our study offers grounds for optimism, however, as the change in attitudes over time shows that new gender roles have gained some legitimacy.

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[†]Professor, University of New Mexico. E-mail: malahtun@unm.edu.

[‡]Associate Professor, University of Oslo. E-mail: f.r.jensenius@stv.uio.no.

[§]PhD student, University of New Mexico. E-mail: msonntag@unm.edu.

1 Introduction

In many advanced economies, gender roles and relations underwent a “quiet revolution” in the 20th century due to changes in the meaning of work in women’s lives (Goldin 2006). Work ceased to be merely a means to supplement family income or insure survival, and increasingly became a mechanism to define personal identity and life course. Women’s educational achievements equalled men’s and wage gaps, at least among single men and women, began to close. Yet the failure of welfare states, social norms, and capitalist organizations to adapt to women’s changing roles has contributed to low birth rates and an aging population, as women and families forgo childrearing in order to stay on in the labor force (Esping-Andersen 2009).

Japan is a case in point: its birthrate suffered acute decline after 1989. The total fertility rate descended to a low of 1.26 in 2005 and rebounded to 1.43 in 2013, but still is not close to replacement levels. To boost the birth rate and avert fiscal collapse, the government has adopted a range of policies and programs to make wage work and parenting more compatible, including expanded parental leave, more child care centers, improved enforcement of equal employment laws, and public relations campaigns aimed at changing social norms surrounding gender roles. The government’s stated goal is to encourage more women to adopt lifetime employment, and companies to include and reward them for doing so.

Until the 2000s, the government’s social change strategy focused primarily on women, and was accompanied by only small gains in fertility rates. Women’s labor force participation grew significantly, but women were employed mostly in non-regular and supplementary jobs, and some 60% left the labor force after becoming mothers (Matsui et al. 2014). Though Japanese feminists had argued for years that social change depended on modifying work styles and men’s roles, the government and other sectors of civil society made primarily rhetorical gestures toward men.¹ After the turn of the century, the state’s approach to

¹Interviews with Mari Miura and Masako Ishii-Kuntz, Tokyo, June 2017. See Appendix A for further

gender equality began to target men more explicitly. It launched a campaign to promote the ideal of the *ikumen* (育メン・イクメン)—men who play an active role in parenting. Then, in 2015, the government began to advocate “workstyle reform” and other programs to change working habits and limit working hours.

In this paper, we analyze the state’s turn to men in the context of the evolution of attitudes and behavior relating to gender roles. We draw on data from the Japanese General Social Surveys (JGSS) conducted between 2000 and 2012, a survey of working men from 2014, and some three dozen interviews conducted in Tokyo in 2017 to explore Japanese attitudes and practices with regard to gender roles and the meaning of work in men’s lives. We show that decades of government effort to “liberate” women and change gender roles have been associated with some changes in *attitudes* toward the gendered division of labor, but few changes in *behavior*. The gap between labor force participation rates has hardly budged, very few men take paternity leave, and few contribute to household chores. Though many men say they want more work-life balance and a more active role in parenting, few have been able to make those wishes a reality.

Our findings show that Japan remains a case of an “incomplete revolution” (Esping-Andersen 2009) in gender roles. Social norms and institutions have not accommodated women’s changing lives or the country’s need for fertility growth. Policies to empower women in the workforce have been layered on top of other policies and practices that provide incentives for traditional families. A constellation of economic, social, and legal institutions go against the governmental rhetoric, including long working hours and seniority systems, tax and pension systems that discourage dependent spouses from working, and a household registration system that upholds patriarchal practices (cf. Boling 1998, 2008; Estévez-Abe 2013) As a result, there is a large gap between attitudes and behavior. The state’s efforts since 2015 represent an attempt to “complete the revolution” by provoking changes in men’s

information about the interviews we are reporting from and a list of respondents.

roles, lives, and the nature of work itself.

Our paper echoes arguments that other scholars have made about the barriers to gender equality and fertility growth. What is new about our research is that it provides some grounds for optimism. In the context of enduring institutions and norms that encourage traditional families, the fact that attitudes have changed over the course of approximately a decade is grounds for hope. Policies that help to change attitudes, even without changing behavior, are significant as they lay the *cultural groundwork* for future behavioral changes. Attitudinal change puts new behavioral options on the table, and increases their legitimacy. If and when incentives change to induce new forms of behavior, they are more likely to be sustainable.

2 Incomplete revolution

Though it may seem anachronistic today, most welfare states in advanced industrial economies were developed around—and furnished incentives to support—the idea of the traditional, gender-structured family. Social policies supported male breadwinners in the event of old age, disability, or unemployment, and presumed that women would perform the “care work” of children, the sick and the elderly, and maintenance of the household, and work for wages only in periods when these domestic responsibilities were less acute (Lewis 1992; Pateman 1988). Classical economic models of household decision making assumed a similar arrangement: households had a single utility function, both partners specialized in the productive and reproductive labor for which they had a comparative advantage, and family members behaved altruistically (Becker and Becker 2009).

Across many countries, the traditional welfare model has persisted even as society has changed, a situation that scholars have called an “incomplete” or “unfinished” revolution (Esping-Andersen 2009; Gornick and Meyers 2003). As women’s lives come to resemble

men's, in terms of their educational attainment and lifelong attachment to the labor market, many are less willing to leave their careers and forsake economic independence to be full-time homemakers. Even women who might opt for such a path are less able to, since surviving in a more flexible and insecure capitalist economy requires that both spouses work for wages, while thriving and reaching the top of such an economy requires that people devote many years to skill development and make themselves available for colleagues and clients around the clock (Goldin 2014; McDonald 2006). Many women cannot afford, or are unwilling to incur, the earnings penalty that motherhood and prolonged exits from the labor market often impose (Correll et al. 2007; Fuchs 1990).

The challenge is to insure the provision of care work when both parents—or potential parents—are active in the labor market. Though the payoff from high quality care work in the home spills over to benefit the state, economy, and society, its costs are born almost entirely by individual families. The rest of society free rides on parents' investments in children (Folbre 2008). One way to alleviate this problem is through public support for, and socialized provision of, care work, such as in Sweden and Norway, where parental leave is generous and early child care is guaranteed. In addition, both Sweden and Norway have promoted changes in men's gender roles by creating “use it or lose it” family leave policies (also called “daddy's quotas”), which provide financial incentives for men to assume a more active role in parenting (Leira 1992, 2002). Another way is for men to assume a great share of care work so that both partners are workers and carers (Gornick and Meyers 2003).

If the state and the market fail to supply care work and economic security, and norms upholding the traditional gender division of labor persist, women tend to have fewer children or to stop reproducing altogether. Across rich countries, fertility and women's labor force participation were negatively correlated in the 1970s, but reversed to a positive correlation in the 1990s (Atoh 2008). Since then, birth rates tend to fall when women lack equal access to the labor market, and to rise when they can work on equal terms and when policies

support balancing work and family (Rosenbluth 2006, p. 9). For these reasons, scholars have concluded that greater gender equality encourages higher fertility. When men share domestic labor, when public policies support working parents, and when women have access to stable income, they are more likely to have children (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; McDonald 2006; Rosenbluth 2006).

Comparative analysis of advanced democracies has found that different countries have achieved relatively higher fertility for a combination of these and other factors (Luci-Greulich and Thévenon 2013). In the U.S., a liberal market economy that permits free entry and exit does not penalize career interruptions in the same way as the coordinated market economies of Europe. What is more, social inequality means that educated women can outsource care work to lower paid domestic workers (Estevez-Abe 2006; Estévez-Abe 2013). Fertility has historically been relatively high, though the U.S. birth rate dropped in 2015 and 2016 and many people cited economic insecurity as a primary reason for not having children (Miller 2018). In Sweden, where fertility is also relatively high, a large public sector employs more than half of working women and does not punish them for taking time off, while generous social policies provide parental leave and universal access to child care (Rosenbluth et al. 2004). Laws in the Netherlands mandate equal pay and status for part time work (Morgan 2008).

2.1 State efforts to change gender roles in Japan

Japanese suffers from lowest-low fertility, which means that the birth rate is far below replacement levels. There are several causes, including the economic decline of the early 1990s which denied a generation the lifetime jobs and economic security of their parents. Other factors that depress reproduction and cohabitation among young people include relatively lower use of oral contraceptives among women, which reduces their sense of empowerment in relationships; the enduring strength of traditional family models, which put pressure on

women to care for elderly parents and in-laws at home; and deference to traditional gender norms, which discourages educated women from marriage (Atoh 2008; Boling 2008; Osawa et al. 2013).

Comparative analysis suggests that another critical reason for lowest-low fertility in Japan is gender inequality at work. Women face numerous hurdles to equitable participation in the labor market, and mothers are even more disadvantaged. The core labor force in large firms tends toward lifetime employment, and the country's economy emphasizes firm-specific skills, both of which penalize career interruptions. Inter-firm labor mobility is low and, apart from their core labor forces, firms rely on a secondary tier of workers to let go during downturns in the business cycle. They have an interest in maintaining older married women as a "reserve" labor force. In urban areas, women have few family members to rely on for support, commuting times between home and work tend to be extensive, and working hours are notoriously long (Boling 2008; Brinton 1993; Nemoto 2013; Rosenbluth 2006).

Historically, the Japanese welfare state did little to help women combine work and family. It was based on the male-breadwinner model, the assumption of lifetime employment, and the understanding that reproductive labor—care of children, elderly, and the household—would be performed by women in the home, though many companies offered their married male workers benefits such as child allowances and housing (Fleckenstein and Lee 2017; Lambert 2007; Osawa 1994; Peng 2002; Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen 2011; Toivonen 2007). Other countries with lowest-low fertility in southern Europe and East Asia have similarly emphasized the family provision of care work and had lower public support for working families (McDonald 2006). The entrenched ruling party (the Liberal Democratic Party, LDP) faced political pressures to keep state budgets low, and so was historically reluctant to invest in child care and other family supports that would have helped women in the labor market (Rosenbluth 2006).

After 1989, when the fertility rate hit a then-historic low of 1.57 children per woman, the

Japanese government introduced more extensive policies to encourage women to work and promote greater work-life balance, including parental leave, expanded access to child care, and universal child allowances (Boling 2015; Ishii-Kuntz 2013; Rosenbluth 2006; Schoppa 2008). The state expanded its efforts as the birthrate continued to slide and then to bottom out at 1.26 in 2005. In Appendix B we sketch the development of this legislation.

The push for gender equality also responded to feminist mobilization and to Japan's ratification of international agreements including the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which motivated adoption of the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOC). Prior to that Law, women were banned from certain occupations and it was legal for companies to discriminate against women in hiring, training, promotions, and benefits. Commonly, companies tracked men and women into gender-specific personnel systems and required women to quit work when they married or got pregnant. The law was reformed in 1997 to ban the gender tracking, and the state began to take action in the 2000s to enforce the law and promote substantive equality (Cook and Hayashi 1980; Parkinson 1989; Weathers 2005). Yet women's economic position remained precarious: they constituted a disproportionate share of non-regular workers and a small minority of managers (Matsui et al. 2014).

Over time, government efforts evolved from their initial emphasis on facilitating women's labor market participation, to urging change in men's roles and greater work-life balance for both men and women. The *Ikumen* project, launched in 2010 by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, is one such effort. The project aims to project a fresh ideal of masculinity to combat the shrinking population and to persuade more men to take parental leave (Ishii-Kuntz 2013; MHLW 2017a).² As explained by the Minister at the time, *ikumen*

²The advertising agency Hakuhodo originally coined the term *ikumen*, which began circulating around 2006 (Mizukoshi et al. 2016; Shimbun 2017). In 2010, then-Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare Nagatsuma Akira used the term in a speech to the Diet and suggested it frame a policy to combat the shrinking population (Ishii-Kuntz 2013). The *Ikumen* project website contains resources for men who want to take leave, such as a template for a Paternity Leave notice, as well as a FAQ section that informs men of their legal

is a play on the word *ikuji* (育児), which means child rearing, and *ikemen* (イケメン), which means good-looking man (House of Councillors 2010). The concept of *ikumen* thus conceptualizes men who are involved in child rearing and housework as “cool” and attractive, creating an alternative masculine ideal to that of the absent salaryman and financial provider.

Due in large part to the attention generated by the Diet speech, *ikumen* was named one of the top ten words of the year in 2010 (Mizukoshi et al. 2016, p. 213). Between 2008 and 2014, a total of 1,903 newspaper articles mentioned the term, which had virtually never appeared before in print. Widespread use of social media in Japan helped diffuse the concept, as have the interests of capitalism. Companies of different types have used the image of *ikumen* to market their products, such as stylish strollers or baby carriers, while advertisements often feature *ikumen* (Mizukoshi et al. 2016, pp. 214-18). In 2012, legislators from different parties formed an *ikumen* caucus in the Diet (Mizukoshi et al. 2016, p. 216).

To create conditions for more *ikumen*, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe began aggressively to promote workstyle reform in 2016. He created and chaired a diverse committee to propose mechanisms to change working conditions. The immediate impetus was the suicide of a young woman employee at the advertising firm Dentsu in 2015, who was desperate and depressed after working more than 100 hours of overtime in the previous month. Her suicide highlighted the toll of Japanese working hours, which OECD data show are longer, on average, than working hours in other countries. Working over time, seven days a week, and past midnight is common, and overtime work is poorly regulated. The Labor Standards Law limits working hours to 40 per week, but unions and corporations often agree on up to 45 hours of “service overtime,” and then an unlimited amount of additional overtime for up to six months per

rights (MHLW 2017a). Members of the promotional committee include Komuro Yoshie, who is Managing Director of “Work-Life Balance,” a consulting firm founded in 2006 that advocates and helps implement reforms of the culture of long working hours. As Komuro states in her TEDxTokyo talk in 2012, she attributes the low birth rate, problems with elderly care, depression, and economic growth in Japan to long working hours (Komuro 2012).

year. As with the woman at Dentsu, some employees literally work themselves to death: the number of suicides on account of *karoshi* (過労死), or “death by overwork,” exceeded 2,000 in 2015. The government’s 2017 white paper on *karoshi* provided survey results showing that approximately 30% of men and 10% of women reported suffering long working hours, while over half reported feeling worries, concerns, and stress about work (MHLW 2017b, p.12;18).

Feminist activists had for years identified long working hours as a principal obstacle to women’s advancement and changes in men’s roles, but the rest of civil society were slower to recognize its importance. Only after an increasingly diverse group, including men’s movements, work-life balance consultants, private sector corporations, and government bureaucrats joined the chorus did the government begin to act. Some civic organizations, such as the Child Caring Men’s Group, Ikujiren, and Fathering Japan had been working on changing men’s roles for years and even decades (Ikujiren 1996; Ishii-Kuntz 2002, 2013). In the 2010s, Fathering Japan offered lectures and seminars nationwide on “fathering”, work-life balance, and other issues to help fathers and child-rearing grandfathers. In 2014, the group launched the *ikuboss* project, referring to a play on the words “ikumen” and “boss,” to persuade managers to promote work-life balance among their employees, as well as themselves (Fathering Japan 2017).

In 2018, the parliament approved one of the workstyle reform committee’s recommendations: a government-sponsored bill modifying the Labor Standards Law (LSL) to cap overtime hours. The result of an agreement forged between the government, the Keidranren (Japan Business Federation), and Rengo (the Japanese Trade Union Confederation), the bill is relatively modest: it limits overtime to an average of 60 hours per month over the course of a year, but up to 100 hours per month during peak times. Critics assailed that such a high overtime ceiling was laughable and could have the result of legitimizing, rather than curbing, overtime.³

³See, e.g., editorial in *The Japan Times*, February 28, 2017. Furthermore, with the “highly professional

Until this point, government policies and promotional campaigns had used “soft power” to promote social change. They *urged* men to rethink their roles, *encouraged* greater sharing of household tasks, and *advised* companies that they needed to change. The state did not penalize corporations for not abiding by these rules or messages, nor did they create strong incentives to induce men to change their behavior.⁴

However, by 2017 the state had altered its approach. Unlike previous efforts, PM Abe’s Action Plan for Workstyle Reform implies actual legislative changes, such as the modification of the Labor Standards Law to impose caps on overtime (anemic as these may be in practice), as well as requirements that non-regular and regular workers receive equal pay and treatment. After years, Abe is applying sticks to force society to change dominant norms of the “ideal worker” (Williams 2001). In spite of its shortcomings, sponsorship of the bill showed that the state was no longer content with rhetorical persuasion. It would use sticks, not just carrots, to change society.

2.2 Countervailing institutional incentives

Despite these government efforts, Japanese reforms remain incomplete. The expansion of parental leave, child care, prosecution of discrimination at work, limits on working hours, and other plans to achieve gender equality, including grand gestures toward forging *ikumen*, coexist with historically-entrenched institutional incentives that uphold the status quo of the male salaryman-breadwinner and the woman caregiver.

Consider the tax system. The head of household may receive a tax deduction for a

workers” system that was introduced as part of this bill, a loophole was created for work-hour regulations to be lifted for individuals whose job requires a high level of expertise (Times 2017). Rengo has pushed for this system to be eliminated, claiming the most important task was to eliminate work hours that are too long, which this system undermines (NHK 2018).

⁴Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen (2011, p. 351) attribute the soft nature of the government’s reform message to the power of the business federation (Keidanren) in committees guiding the work-life balance campaign in the mid 2000s. The Keidanren insisted that companies voluntarily pursue work-life balance reforms, and that the government’s job was to create a supportive environment but not produce new laws or regulations.

dependent spouse, even one who works, provided that the spouse does not earn more than about 1.3 million yen per year. The persistence of the deduction, commonly referred to as the “1.3 million yen ceiling,” creates incentives for women to be housewives or take low-paying jobs. Breadwinners may also claim dependent allowances from their employers (Osawa et al. 2013).

Though intended in part to provide partial welfare benefits to compensate women for their otherwise unpaid domestic labor, the fact that such compensation occurs via tax credits on a husband’s income reinforces the traditional division of labor between men and women (Boling 2008; Osawa 1994, p. 164). What is more, families are typically entitled to a tax credit if three generations are residing together, which encourages at-home caretaking as opposed to defamilization (Toyofuku 2018).

Pensions are also important. Everyone, including full-time housewives, is entitled to a minimum pension, but people have to pay into the pension system only if their income exceeds certain levels, around 1.3 million yen. Like the tax laws, pension rules reduces women’s incentives to take on more than part-time low-paid jobs, provided they are married with a working spouse (Boling 1998; Matsui et al. 2014; Peng 2002).

Another institution that reinforces the idea of the woman as dependent and the man as the main breadwinner, is the household registration system (*koseki* 戸籍). This system—dating back to the Meiji period—connects all citizens to the state by virtue of their membership in a family (*ie*), for which there is a designated household head and a common surname. Though the postwar civil code introduced the principle of gender equality and granted men and women formally equal rights and obligations, the government continued to require household members to register as a *koseki* under a common surname, though the *koseki* unit shifted to the nuclear family from the large, extended *ie* (Shin 2008).⁵ Through these rules, the state

⁵The surname did not have to be the man’s; families were free to choose the woman’s surname (though in practice, merely three percent did) (Shin 2008).

effectively compels women to give up their names upon marriage, which many associate with a loss of their independent and professional identities. Government and legislative efforts to revise the name laws have all failed, as conservatives have mobilized against perceived threats to Japanese family values (Shin 2008). Though public opinion has shifted on this issue significantly since the 1970s, court rulings in 2015 and 2016 upheld the common surname requirement and stated that it did not place an undue burden on women (Rich 2016).

Finally, consider the stiff hierarchies and seniority systems in private and public organizations. Inflexible norms govern status, promotion, and pay (Brinton 1988). By enduring grueling hours and staying loyal to the firm, workers will ascend the corporate ladder. Sociological and anthropological analyses show overtime work is important to demonstrate commitment, forge consensus, and develop a common identity among workers (Erez and Earley 1993; Nemoto 2013; Ono 2018). Yet the culture of overtime work may be the most formidable hurdle to women's advancement. Overtime intensifies the separation between work and family, entrenches masculinist norms in the workplace, and reinforces stereotypes of women, and especially mothers, as incompetent and uncommitted (p. 519-524 Nemoto 2013). Combined with notoriously long commutes in urban areas, the workplace culture makes it impossible for women to combine career and care for children.⁶ Workstyle reform and limits on working hours mark only the beginning of change to workplace cultures.

3 Gap Between Attitudes and Behavior

The state efforts to change gender roles have been going on for almost three decades, with a focus on men since around the year 2000. Has this evolution of governmental rhetoric and policy been accompanied with changes in attitudes or social practices? In this section, we

⁶In a 2010 survey conducted by the Ministry of Labor, 65% of women who left work after becoming mothers cited long working hours as a reason (Matsui et al. 2014).

draw on survey data and interview evidence,⁷ to explore the contradictions between official rhetoric, changing attitudes, and behavioral patterns.

The first survey we look at was conducted by Rengo (the Japanese Trade Union Confederation) in 2014, of 1000 working men aged 20–59.⁸ Some 525 of the respondents have children. The survey includes specific questions about fatherhood and attitudes toward paternity leave.

The second data source consists of the Japanese General Social Survey (JGSS), nationally representative surveys of men and women aged 20-89 that have been carried out regularly since 2000.⁹ To study changes over time, we look at the surveys conducted in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2010, and 2012. The survey sample is 4,500 people in 2000 and gradually increases to 9,000 people in 2012. In these surveys the response rates are 50 to 60%.

3.1 Men’s attitudes toward work-life balance and parental leave

First, we focus on the Rengo data, which reveal a stark difference in the attitudes among men toward balancing work and family and the reality that they live. In the left panel of Figure 1 we see that a high share of men with children say either that they would like to prioritize their children over work or that they would like to balance work and child rearing. The responses vary by age group: from 89% in the 20-29 age group down to 76% in the 50-59 age group. This suggests that a high number of all men *would like* to spend time and effort on their children, and the numbers are even higher for young men.

This desire to balance work and family life is not, however, reflected in the day-to-day lives of all those men. In the right panel we see the share of men who actually think that they are

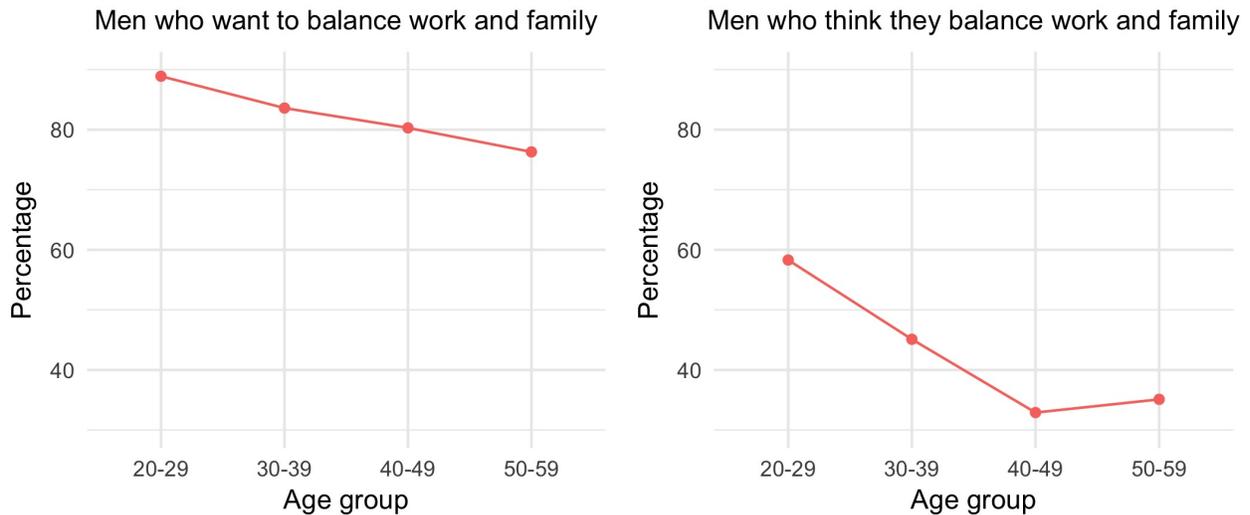
⁷See Appendix A for information about our interviews.

⁸We are very grateful to Kumie Inoue and to Yuko Sugamura of Rengo for sharing these data with us.

⁹The JGSS are designed and conducted by the JGSS Research Center at Osaka University of Commerce (Joint Usage/Research Center for Japanese General Social Surveys accredited by Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), in collaboration with the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo.

able to prioritize their children or balance work and child rearing. Here the overall numbers are much lower, but we also see generational differences with the younger respondents being less likely to say that their work takes priority.

Figure 1: Attitudes and realities of work-life balance among working men with children



Paternity leave has been an important part of the *ikumensu* agenda. As discussed above, men have the right to paid leave and (as this is an easily observable measure of changing gender roles) it is something that receives considerable public attention. Managers of government agencies are reportedly under pressure to encourage men to take the leave, and to require at least one man to serve as the “sacrificial lamb” in this regard, in order to show they are conforming with policy. A small number of companies in Japan actually require men to take at least 5 days of paternity leave.

However, in our survey data, the gap between aspiration and reality is clearly visible in behavior surrounding paternity leave. Of all the respondents in the Rengo survey (with and without children) about 69% say they know about the child care leave law and 61% say they know it also applies to men. The numbers are somewhat higher (73% and 68%) when we reduce the sample to men with children. This suggests that many, although far from all,

men are aware of their right to paternity leave.

Whether they know about their right to paternity leave or not, few men actually take such leave. Of the men with children in the Rengo survey, less than 6% say they had taken any paternity leave at all. The share of young men with children saying that they had taken leave is somewhat higher (11%), but the rates are still low. A common perception in Japan is that men do not wish to take leave, but in this survey sample 45% of the men with children say they had wanted to take leave but had not taken it because they felt they could not; 6% say they had taken it; the rest say they had not wanted to take leave. Though again, the younger the men, the less likely they are to say they did not want it.

Of the men without kids in the survey sample, 26% say they want to take leave and think they can, but 52% say they feel they cannot. And again, younger men are more positive toward taking leave. Here too we see a clear generational change, if not in actual behavior at least in attitudes.

Among our interview respondents, none of the men had personally taken paternity leave, though most were able to identify other male colleagues who had taken leave. This includes employees of institutions that actively work to increase the uptake of paternity leave. Similarly, none of the men interviewed by Mizukoshi et al. (2016, p. 223) in their article about the *ikumēn* phenomenon had taken parental leave either, though some had taken some of their annual paid leave in order to be present at the births of their children. When we asked our interviewees why they hadn't taken leave, many said that it had simply never occurred to them. One executive said: "I'm 50. I have three daughters. I have never taken paternity leave." When we asked him if he would have liked to take it, he replied: "I didn't think about it."¹⁰ Several people also remarked on enduring cultural hostility to paternity leave.

In the Ministry of Labor, we were told that managers speak to new fathers directly to persuade them to take the leave, and the minister meets with all managerial staff once a

¹⁰Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

month to remind them of the need to facilitate a supportive climate for fathers. Approximately 30% of men who work in the Ministry take paternity leave, though for a short period of less than one week.¹¹

Among men in the Rengo survey who had taken leave, 67% say they had taken less than 5 days. It is important to note, however, that many new fathers take advantage of the annual paid leave they are entitled to under the Labor Standards Law (LSL). The LSL requires employers to grant employees up to 20 days of leave per year, at full pay (paid by the employer), for any reason (such as holidays). Most Japanese take only about 10 days.¹² Ministry of Labor surveys show that approximately 40% of men say they take annual paid leave for the purposes of child care (more broadly, not necessarily of a newborn). We were told that men prefer to use their annual leave because it is leave with full pay, not with reduced pay like the parental leave.¹³

One obstacle to paternity leave is harassment, which includes threatening, bullying, or making fun of men who declare their intention to take leave or who actually take it. Whereas maternity harassment (*matahara*, マタハラ) has received attention in the media and is being actively address by government agencies, paternity harassment (*patahara*, パタハラ) receives less attention. Some 12% of the men with children in the Rengo survey say they had experienced paternity harassment.

3.2 Gender roles: attitudes and behavior

To chart the gap between attitudes and behaviors in a larger sample, we turn to analysis of the JGSS data. In comparative perspective, average Japanese attitudes toward gender roles and family values tend to be conservative. For example, three-quarters of Japanese

¹¹Interviews at the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare; interview with Professor Glenda Roberts.

¹²For this reason, getting workers to take leave for longer periods is another goal of the workstyle reform project.

¹³Interviews at the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare.

surveyed in the 2012 International Social Survey state that care for children under school age should be provided primarily by family members (Fleckenstein and Lee 2017, p. 19). Our analysis, however, reveals changes in attitudes toward gender roles over time, though a persisting sexual division of labor in practice.

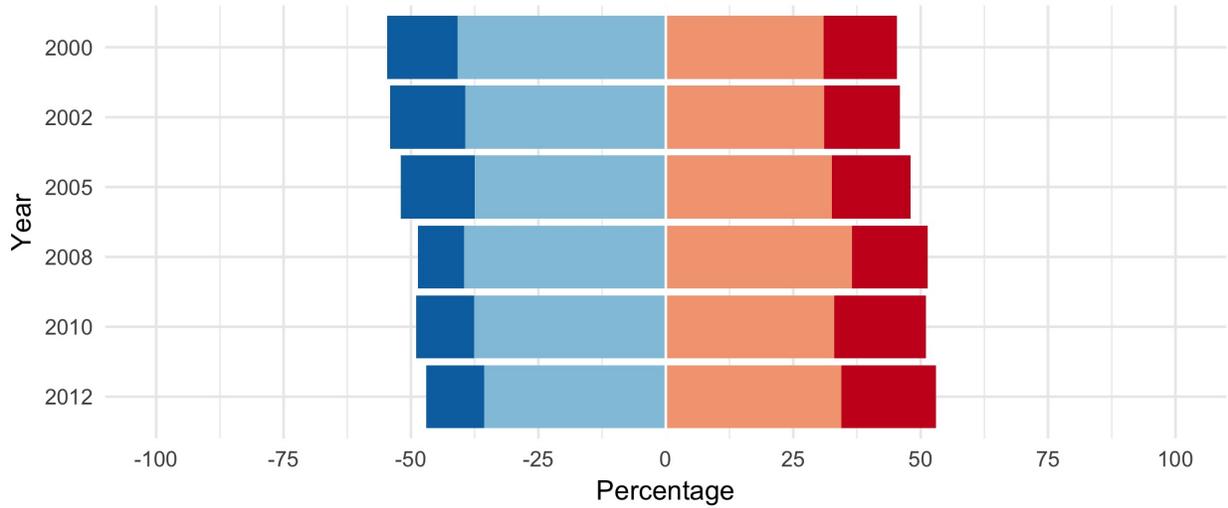
The top panel of Figure 2 shows that 55% of all respondents in the JGSS survey from 2000 say they “Agree” or “Somewhat agree” with the statement “A husband’s job is to earn money; a wife’s job is to look after the home and family.” This number goes down to 47% by 2012. In the bottom panel of Figure 2 we see that 65% of the respondents in the 2000 survey “Agree” or “Somewhat agree” with the statement that “A woman’s happiness lies in a marriage,” but that this number goes down to 46% by 2012. These are substantial changes given that we are looking at just a 12-year period and suggests that aggregate attitudes are becoming more supportive of multiple masculine and feminine identities.

Similarly, we see a reduction in the share of people who think a wife should not work if the husband earns enough, as shown in the top panel of Figure 3, and a high and increasing share of respondents think that men should be able to cook and take care of themselves (bottom panel).

Alongside these gradual changes in attitudes, actual behavior continues to uphold a strict sexual division of labor. Men work much more outside the home, and women retain the vast majority of responsibility for work inside of the home. For example, the left panel of Figure 4 shows the percentage of men and women aged 30–50 who say they worked in the previous week. The right panel shows the same percentages for men and women aged 30–50 who have *at least one child* younger than the age of 16. There are at least three patterns worth noting in these plots. First, the share of workers is consistently lower among women than among men. Among the female survey respondents aged 30–50 in the 2000 survey, 69% say they work, compared to 97% among the men. Second, the share of women working is even lower in the sub-sample with at least one young child: 64% say they work, compared to 99% of

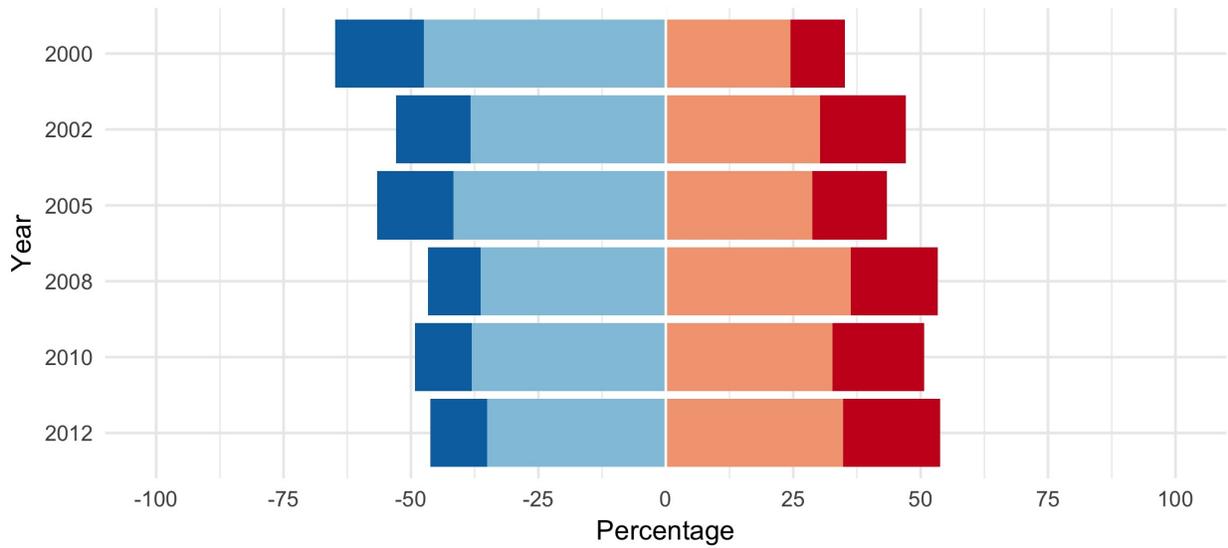
Figure 2: Changes in attitudes toward gender roles, 2000–2012

A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family



Answers: Agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Disagree

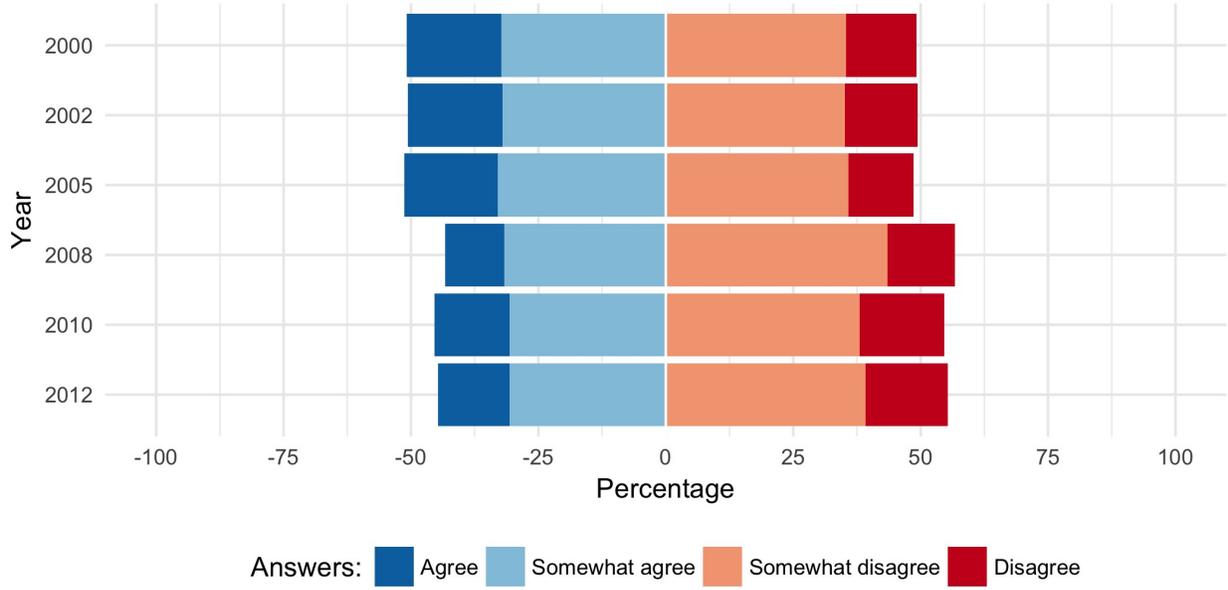
A woman's happiness lies in a marriage



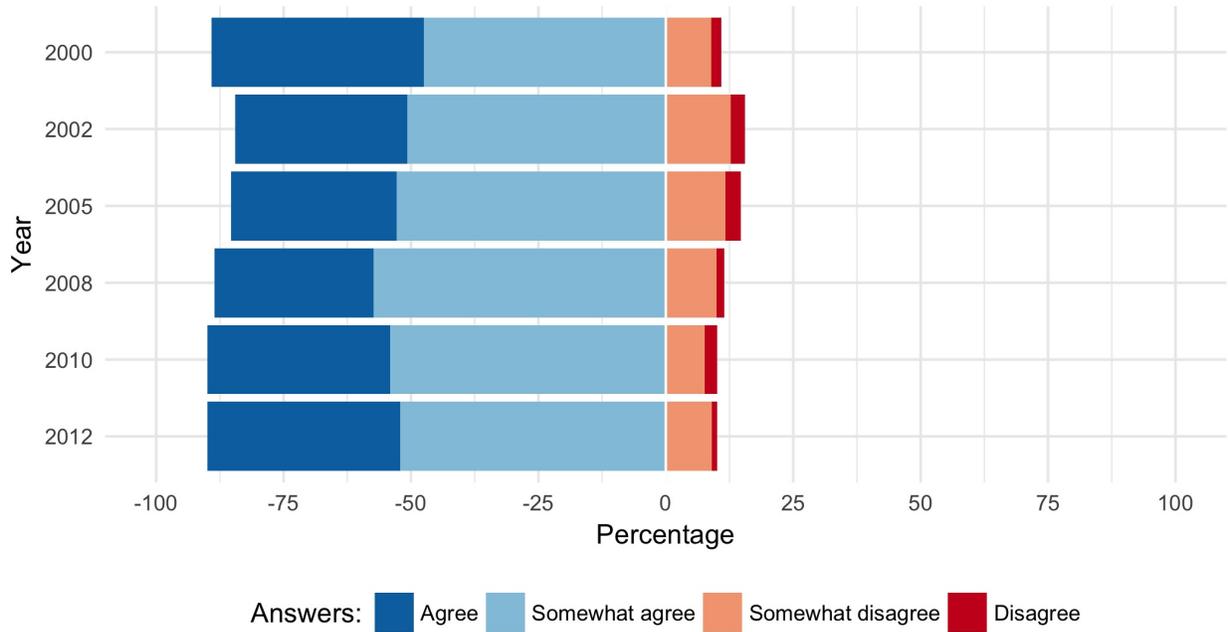
Answers: Agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Disagree

Figure 3: Attitudes toward men's work in the house, 2000–2012

If a husband has sufficient income, it is better for his wife not to have a job

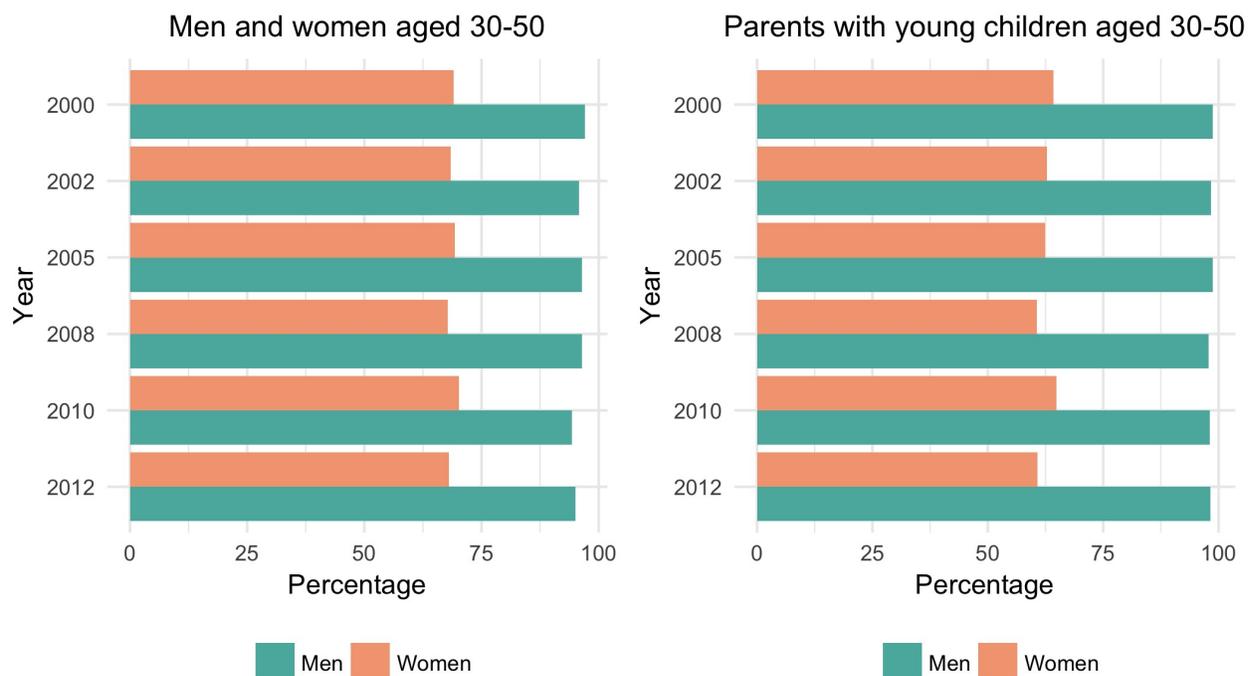


Men should cook and look after themselves



the men. And finally, there is almost no change in these numbers between 2000 and 2012, despite state efforts to get more women into the workforce.

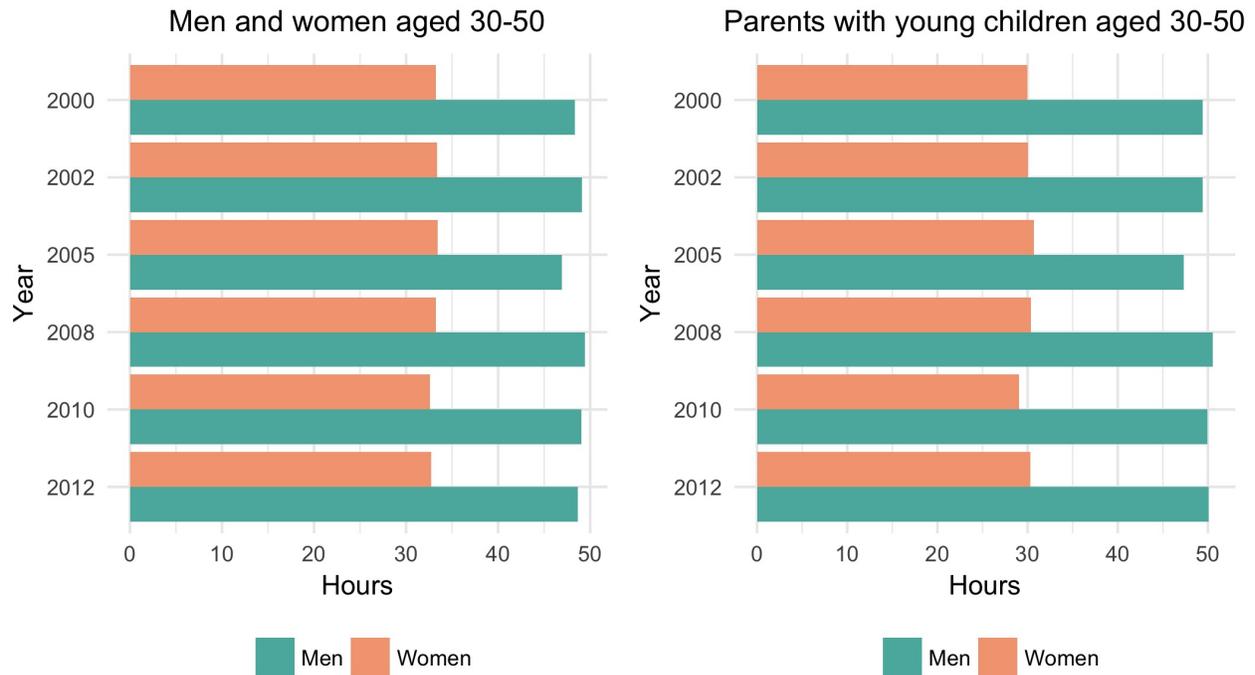
Figure 4: Percentage of men and women who said they worked the previous week (ages 30–50)



Similar patterns emerge if we look at the average working hours *among those who work*, as shown in Figure 5. In 2000, men report an average of 48 working hours, while women report an average of 33 working hours. Among parents with young children, fathers report working an average of 49 hours, while mothers report an average of 29 hours—and this is among the 64% of mothers who say they work at all. Here too there is little change over time.

The sexual division of labor is also clearly visible in data on men and women’s contribution to household chores. In Figure 6 we show the percentage of respondents aged 30–50 with at least one child younger than the age of 16 who report that they never cook dinner, do laundry, or clean the house. Almost none of the female respondents fall into this category,

Figure 5: Average hours of work reported among those who said they worked the previous week (ages 30–50)



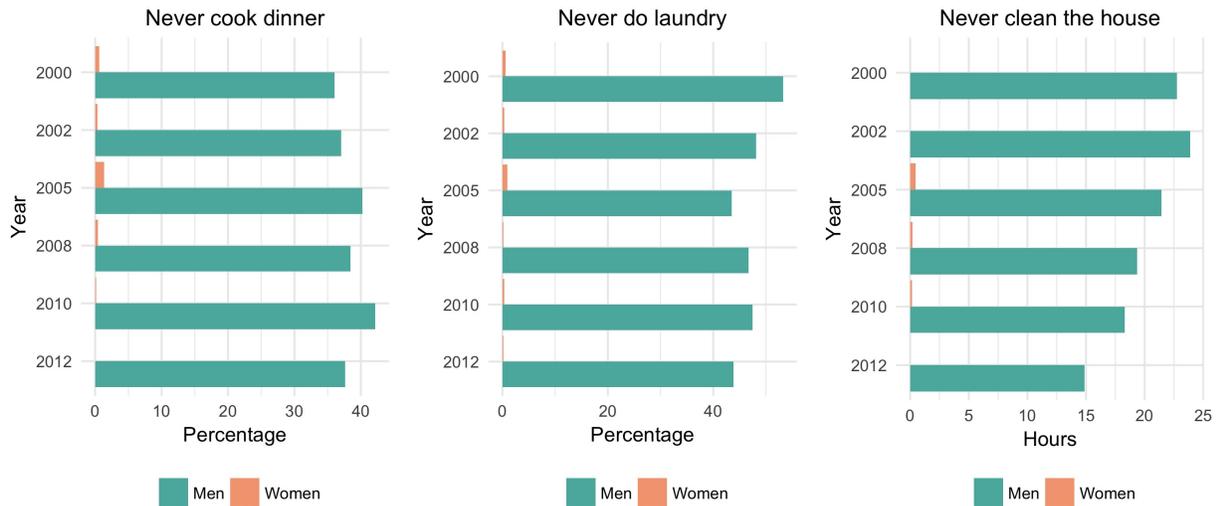
in fact most female respondents say they cook and clean almost every day. Across the years, close to 40% of the male respondents say they never cook dinner and more than 40% say they never do laundry. However, we see change in the question about cleaning. Here, more than 20% of the male respondents say they never clean in the house in the early 2000s, while this goes down to about 15% by the 2012 survey.

3.3 Men’s reactions to government campaigns

During our fieldwork in Japan, interviewees were aware of the campaigns for work-life balance, active fathering, and workstyle reform. They were critical of the seniority system and old working habits. “Long working hours hinder creative behavior,” as a METI official put it.¹⁴ Robert Dujarric, the director of the Asian Studies Center at Temple University in

¹⁴Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

Figure 6: House chores for respondents aged 30–50 with at least one child younger than 16 years of age



Tokyo, observed that “working at a Japanese company is one step above being in prison.”¹⁵ One public sector manager recalled that he and others of his generation worked under a “militaristic totalitarian command structure” while in their 20s, as “soldiers without human rights.”¹⁶

A wide array of actors said they recognize the connections between work-life balance and diversity on the one hand and economic competitiveness and corporate performance on the other. A CEO said, “these changes are pushed by globalization, by the changing world economy [...] it’s not just our idea or the Abe government’s idea.”¹⁷ A METI official added: “The external environment is changing, and it’s not so easy to follow those changes with homogeneous workers [...] diversity is a tool to change the homogeneous human portfolio.”¹⁸

Though leaders recognize and accept the need for change, old ways emphasizing hierarchy are deeply ingrained. One government official said that the older generation of middle managers that came of age during the “Japanese miracle,” or post-war economic boom,

¹⁵Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

¹⁶Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

¹⁷Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

¹⁸Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

witnessed the success of the lifetime employment model of homogeneous male workers. He observed: “in the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese companies had a strong position in global market, and with homogeneous workers. Senior people remember those days!”¹⁹ As one CEO put it, “Though we are trying to change lifetime employment, the social understandings of big companies still favor lifetime employment.”²⁰ A METI official said, “Not to change is not an option for us [...] but there’s a big fight inside of companies.”

As this suggests, men of different generations seemed to receive the government’s messages in different ways. One government official told us that top managers have an adept understanding of the need for workstyle reform, as does the younger generation: both believe that work-life balance is good for profit, that it increases loyalty to company, and that it helps retain talented employees. But the mindset of middle managers impedes change. Middle managers think that each job requires specific skills, and that it’s hard to find someone to cover an “expert’s” job, for example when that expert is on parental leave.²¹ It is widely recognized that organizational evaluation criteria should shift from seniority to performance, and many organizations have set up systems of intersubjective performance evaluation, in which supervisors and even subordinates complete surveys. One middle-aged manager, however, described the transition from seniority to performance evaluation as “painfully difficult.”²² This and other efforts at workplace flexibility confront numerous challenges.

Other managers were defensive about long working hours and explained to us that hours at work were not always wasted and that people spend those hours in the office productively. Others noted that, for workers (especially men) long accustomed to spending hours at the office, home life was unfamiliar, and they didn’t always feel welcome there. Indeed, a morning television program called *Ohayo Nihon* (Good Morning Japan) in Japan referred to

¹⁹Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

²⁰Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

²¹Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

²²Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.

the *Furari-man* phenomenon that has emerged due to companies cutting hours (Nakai and Yamauchi 2018; Uenishi 2018). *Furari-man* are men that refuse to go home straight after work and kill time in bars and restaurants. As more companies let their employees go home earlier a couple of nights a week, the number of *Furari-men* is increasing.

As the survey data and our interviews show, many men's identities are still centered on work. One executive confessed that, "I work hard. In this past month, I was in Europe one week, US one week, and Asia one week. I really feel this is important, for the company, for society, for policy making. I feel responsible. I am highly motivated to work." Another said, "Working hard is like playing on an American football team: hard time, tough work, but sometimes we achieve some goals."²³

Commitment to work thus limits take-up of the *ikumens* role promoted by the government and civic movements. Yet cracks are appearing, as the striking narrative of another executive shows: "From 2011 to 2015 I worked in India, and my way of thinking changed dramatically. I felt that we should enjoy our lives. In India, people worked, but also enjoyed life. I'm 50, and now thinking about the next 50 years. In India, people arrived late, left early, and took a long lunch. People love family. They don't want to work all the time. We were establishing a regional headquarters in Delhi. It was a lot of work. I sometimes asked people to come to work on Saturdays and Sundays and they didn't come. In Japan, they came on Saturdays and Sundays without hesitation!. In Japan, people love their families, but feel a sense of obligation and responsibility to the company."²⁴ Today's challenge is for the government and other reformers to convince people that putting family first may benefit the company too.

²³Interviews, Tokyo, June 2017.

²⁴Interview conducted in Tokyo in June, 2017.

4 Conclusions

The Japanese government and other social actors seek to change gender roles in order to raise the birth rate, support an aging society, and enhance corporate innovation and productivity. In line with the findings of decades of feminist scholarship, the state has recognized that gender is not just about women, but rather a system of social norms and relations. It is not enough just to focus on women's lives and opportunities. Changing gender involves and includes men. To promote diversity and inclusion, the state has thus launched a campaign to induce men to become *ikumen*, or active fathers.

Parallel to policies and promotional campaigns that provide for gender-neutral parental leave and encourage work-life balance, survey data show that attitudes have changed. Most men want to take paternity leave, balance work and family, and assume more responsibility in the home. But behavior has hardly budged, as material incentives continue to be stacked against men's ability to be *ikumen*. Such a life is risky. Under the seniority system, taking parental leave or other time off of work may jeopardize promotion and pay. Tax laws impose a penalty on dual-career families. And supervisors and co-workers expect years of continuous employment. Deviating from the salary man ideal is not just a matter of rebelling against oppressive social norms. It imposes tangible material costs.

This situation resembles a collective action problem. Society as a whole will gain if more men become *ikumen*: women will work, families will breed, public coffers will grow, and the state will avert fiscal crisis. But as individuals, men confront incentives to conform to traditional roles in order to insure their own—and their families'—financial security. There is a misalignment between societal and individual well being.

To offer incentives for behavioral change, the state should alter individual calculations of risk and benefit. Eliminate the dependent tax deduction. Stop giving pensions to housewives. Offer part-time workers equal pay and benefits. Reform the civil code to permit spouses to

retain separate surnames. Such moves would likely alienate the ruling party's traditional bases of support, but would enable Japanese citizens to live in ways they already see as legitimate and desirable.

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Online Appendix

A Interviews

To understand more about the attitudes toward gender roles, state efforts to promote fathering, work-life balance, workstyle reform, and mechanisms that may prevent societal change, we conducted semi-structured interviews in Tokyo in June 2017.

Our interviewees included government officials, representatives of civil society, academics, business people, workers, and students. The interviews ranged from about half an hour to three hours and were conducted in English or Japanese depending on the preference of the respondents. Table A.1 provides a list of our interview respondents.

Our analysis is also informed by Sonntag’s upbringing in Japan, as well as Htun’s year living in Tokyo in 2006-2007.

Table A.1: Name and organization of interview respondents

	Name	Organization
1	Aziz Aditya, Faizah	Temple University
2	Cai Ni, Coffee	Temple University
3	Chang, Annie	ACE Global Solutions
4	Dujarric, Robert	Temple University
5	Fujisawa, Hideaki	METI
6	Fukumoto, Yukari	Kakimoto Arms
7	Genka, Makiko	Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare
8	Hayashi, Yoshiko	Waseda University; Journalism
9	Hiramatsu, Kozo	KOZOcom

Table A.1: Name and organization of interview respondents

	Name	Organization
10	Hiwatari, Nobuhiro	Tokyo University
11	Hiwatari, Yumi	Sophia University
12	Hymans, Jacques	University of Southern California
13	Inoue, Kumie	Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation)
14	Ishibashi, Hidenobu	Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office
15	Ishii-Kuntz, Masako	Ochanomizu University
16	Kabran, Chriselle	TMJ Design
17	Kage, Rieko	Tokyo University
18	Kan, Seigo	Waseda University
19	Kasuya, Yuko	Keio University
20	Matsui, Rihito	Hitachi
21	Matsuo, Miwa	Tokyo Gas
22	Minagawa, Masumi	Posi-Net
23	Miura, Mari	Sophia University
24	Miwa, Takane	Hitachi
25	Inoue, Nagisa	(formerly) Goldman Sachs
26	Nakanishi, Hiroaki	Hitachi
27	Katsuko Nanao	Nanao Restaurant
28	Ochiai, Miho	Hitachi
29	Roberts, Glenda	Waseda University
30	Rokumoto, Kayo	Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare
31	Sakai, Moe	METI

Table A.1: Name and organization of interview respondents

	Name	Organization
32	Shin, Ki-Young	Ochanomizu University
33	Sugamura, Yuko	Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation)
34	Sunami, Akihiko	Abandoned Chemical Weapons Office, Cabinet Office
35	Suzuki, Yoshiko	Grief Counseling Center
36	Takuechi, Yasuko	Hitachi
37	Toyofuku, Miki	Ochanomizu University
38	Yamano, Yoichi	Hitachi

B Development of work-family laws and policies

Japan’s Child Care and Family Leave laws create a framework in which all parents, including men, can take paid time off from work to care for children (Ishii-Kuntz 2013). The initial law was adopted in 1992 (MHLW 1992), and various amendments extended the period of leave to 1 year (2005), allowed men with full-time housewives to take leave (2010), and raised the rate of salary reimbursement rate to 67% for a 6 month leave (Gender Equality Bureau 2017).²⁵

However, parental leave was (until recently) available and paid only for full-time, regular workers, not for irregular workers, workers on fixed term contracts, or workers on the job for less than one year. Effectively, these restrictions meant that in the early 2000s parental leave has been available to less than one-fifth of working women (Toivonen 2007, p. 24).

²⁵Other efforts include the Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation Children (次世代育成支援対策推進法), a timed legislation passed in 2003, which calls for recognition of fathers’ (as well as mothers’ and guardians’) primary responsibility to raise children (MHLW 2014).

Ironically, then, parental leave was available primarily for men, few of whom actually used it. Fixed term contract workers were first included (under certain conditions) in 2005. In 2017 the conditions were further changed to include everyone who has been employed for at least one year before their child is born and has their contract until the time the child is 1.5 years old.

In 1994, the first “Angel Plan” (エンゼルプラン) to combat the declining birthrate recognized the need to shorten working hours, foster greater work-life balance, and promote greater sharing of housework and childrearing between husband and wife (Cabinet Office 2005; MHLW 1994). This plan discussed needs for measures such as shortening the work hours and creating a work environment in which workers can balance their work and child rearing (MHLW 1994). It also discussed the creation of an environment where both husband and wife share housework and child rearing responsibilities (MHLW 1994).

The New Angel Plan, implemented in 1999, emphasized the need to increase nursery schools, including for infants aged 0 to 2 (MHLW 1999). The plan also suggested measures to make it easier to take child care leave to return to work after and held that the “work first” corporate culture needs to be changed (MHLW 1999). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Labor’s Women’s Bureau proposed in 2000 that men are legitimate targets of the governments “family-friendly” policies, and that corporations need to change their working cultures (Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen 2011, p. 349). Following the Angel plans, the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare implemented a new measure called “Countermeasures to the Falling Birthrate Plus One” (少子化プラスワン) in 2002, which included rethinking men’s workstyle (MHLW 2002). This new plan included a new goal of increasing fathers and mothers who take child care leave (MHLW 2002).

Around 2007, the Cabinet Office created a committee consisting of representatives from the *Keidanren* (Federation of Business Organizations), *Rengo* (Trade Union Confederation), and the government, which produced the Work-Life Balance Charter. The Charter recog-

nized the growth of dual income households, and the lack of support for them, and established that work-life balance policies are investments in the future. It stated it as a goal that more men should take parental leave, along with reducing working hours, and getting mothers back to work quickly (Office for Work-Life Balance 2007). As a result of these efforts, the concept of “work-life balance” gained greater traction throughout society. Though the term appeared in only two *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper articles in 2004 and 9 articles in 2005, a whopping 109 articles mentioned and discussed the term in 2008 (Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen 2011, p. 349).

In 2008, the Cabinet Office launched the Change! JPN (カエル！ジャパン), or Kaeru! Japan, campaign, a word play on *kaeru*, which means both change and frog—featuring a frog as a mascot. The goal was to change working styles and realize work-life balance by utilizing governmental, regional, corporate, and organizational efforts. The main message of Change! JPN was that the lack of work-life balance has resulted in the decline in the birth rate and with it the size of the workforce, thereby negatively affecting society as a whole (Office for Work-Life Balance 2017).

In the 2010s, government policy began more explicitly to emphasize the connection between changing gender roles and identities, workstyle reform, and the promotion of diversity and inclusion—often framed as strategies to enhance corporate value and economic competitiveness. The second, third, and fourth versions of the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society (男女共同参画), which came into effect in 2005, 2010, and 2015 (the first version of the law dates from 2000), included plans targeting fathers. The second Basic Law addressed the need to rethink workstyles (Gender Equality Bureau 2005), while the third Basic Law aimed to promote work-life balance for both men and women, men’s participation in housework, the normalization of diverse workstyles, changes in the work environment, and the reduction of working hours (Gender Equality Bureau 2010). This third iteration of the law set specific numerical goals for a decrease in the share of workers with 60+ hour work weeks, an increase

in the number of workers taking paid vacation leave, and an increase in the share of men taking parental leave (Gender Equality Bureau 2010). The fourth Basic Law called for a reform of “men-oriented working styles” (Gender Equality Bureau 2017).

The Act on the Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace (女性活躍推進法), which came into force in 2015, recognized that many women are forced to resign from their work due to marriage, pregnancy, birth, child care, and family care, and called for mutual cooperation and sharing between men and women in the family (Gender Equality Bureau 2015). In addition, the Act required public and private sector organizations with more than 300 employees to collect and publicize gender-disaggregated data on employment patterns, such as numbers of new hires, career trajectories, working hours, and women in management, and also to develop plans to promote gender equality (Gender Equality Bureau 2015).

In 2016, when the Abe government established the Council for the Realization of Workstyle Reform, a committee initially chaired by the PM himself. In 10 meetings taking place over a six month period, the Council developed an ambitious “Action Plan for the Realization of Workstyle Reform,” which committed the state, business, and labor to work together to achieve shared goals. At the final meeting in March 2017, when the Action Plan was formally approved, Abe declared (PMO 2017):

The approval of the Action Plan for the Realization of Work Style Reform is a historical step for reform to change the work style in Japan. Some have even touted it as a major reform in the history of postwar Japan’s labor laws and regulations [...] There may be some people who have doubts as to whether labor customs that have become embedded in Japanese culture and lifestyle for many years can truly be reformed. Be that as it may, I am convinced that when future generations look back, they will surely remember 2017 as the starting point for the changes in the work style in Japan.

The Action plan stated that: “The greatest challenge to the revitalization of Japan’s economy is workstyle reform” (Cabinet Office 2017, p. 2), and then identified three major areas to tackle. The first is the asymmetry in the conditions, status, treatment, and earnings of regular and non-regular workers. The Plan argued that discrimination against non-regular workers reduced their incentives to improve and innovate and lowers productivity. Meanwhile, long working hours depress the birthrate, women’s labor force participation, and men’s contributions at home. Finally, the “single-track career path,” which upholds homogenous norms of workers and working styles, constrains the working opportunities of different groups (including women, young people, and the elderly) and of individuals across their life course (Cabinet Office 2017). As mentioned in the paper, one of the action plan’s first products was a bill in parliament that capped overtime hours.

Many actors frame the need for changes in men’s roles, greater work-life balance, and workstyle reform in terms of economic necessity. As the “Action Plan for the Realization of Workstyle Reform” of a committee convened by the Cabinet Office put it, “The greatest challenge to the revitalization of Japan’s economy is workstyle reform” (Cabinet Office 2017, p. 2). Abe government’s promotion of “womenomics” is also usually expressed in instrumental terms, as a means to promote economic competitiveness and growth.

However, this may also be changing: a 2017 document we received during an interview at the Gender Equality Bureau emphasized that male participation in housework and child rearing will lead to a happier relationship with the spouse, have a positive effect on children, and result in men learning skills they cannot learn at work. The document also held that men’s participation in housework will increase women’s participation in the workforce, curb the declining birthrate—as households with greater male participation in child rearing are more likely to have more than 2 children—and reduce the number of single people, as many women want to marry men that participate more in the household (Gender Equality Bureau 2017).