Chapter 3

Narratives of Child Care in Public Policy in Japan: Comprehensive Support for Child-Rearing

Mutsuko Takahashi
Kibi International University, Japan

ABSTRACT

The repositioning of certain phenomena as issues and selectiveness and prioritization when adding specific issues into policy agenda are not always accompanied by scientific evidence. Much has been spoken and written about childcare, family, and the reconciliation of work and family issues by the media, critiques, scholars, and citizens for decades in Japan. Still, many years passed before public policy started any serious attempt to make a proper response. Despite substantial public attention, some issues were not immediately meant to be major agendas for public policy, unlike others. Implicit or explicit priority or selectiveness when making policy agendas for specific issues does matter in daily life.

INTRODUCTION

Japan has reached the aged society with fewer children than ever. Japan’s natural population decline exceeded 400,000 for first time in 2018 and the primary cause was the continued low level of childbirths and the estimated number of children a woman will have in her lifetime stood now at 1.42 (Yomiuri Shimbun 8 June, 2019 reporting the first government release of rough figures for 2018 population data). The reality is that Japan has entered a demographic vicious circle and the decline in population size is likely to accelerate. It is already reaching the level of one prefecture a year and as such can not be easily ignored. Though such demographic change itself is not totally unique among the industrialized countries, the decline of total fertility rate since the 1970s was not regarded as urgent on Japanese policy agenda until recent years. In 1989 it was reported that Japan’s total fertility rate remained under 1.6 and this is often described as the “1.59 shock”. Following the new awakening to the reality of steady decline of births Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (hereafter referred as MHLW) formulated “Angels Plan”

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in 1994 and “New Angels Plan” in 1999 in order to pull the brakes on decrease of children. These plans were introduced in order to increase capacity of day-care services for children with emphasis on more day-care for infants and children of preschool age, to promote reconciliation of work and family life by increasing the use of child-care leave and recommending shortened and flexible working hours for those with small children, and, finally, to reform the fixed gender divisions of labor at home and work. Such attempt could be valued in the sense that each of these factors was related to declined total fertility rate. However, these plans in the 1990s have remained a paper tiger, not successfully potent for making a real difference to the level of total fertility rate and avert the situation from aggravating rapidly. At present Japan is continuing to have less babies each year and, as immigration remains strictly controlled, experiencing accelerating decrease of total population. Even recent steps in 2019 to increase the number of foreign workers are not likely to have significant impact on child-births or long-term prospects of population growth as one of the primary policy goals of recent changes in immigration policy is to make sure that most of the new guest workers are on time-limited visas that do not allow family members to accompany them and that they will have to leave Japan. The policy choice was taken on the grounds that the unskilled workers provide a cheap and controllable source of labor and do not require any steps to integrate them into the Japanese society (Cf. Harding 2019). According to the National Census of 2015, published in autumn 2016, Japan’s total population, including non-Japanese nationals, was 127,094,745, which was decrease of 962,607 compared to the census of 2010. This meant that Japan’s total population moved into decrease for the first time since 1920 when the national census was started. The decline has continued and the current level in 2019 is about 126 million. Furthermore, population decline is hitting especially hard in rural and regional Japan (such regions as Hokkaidô and Tôhoku, in particular), due to a high pace of continued migration to Japan’s major cities, as well as rapid ageing (see e.g. Harding 2019). Therefore, the demographic changed is transforming Japan rapidly and making it a very different kind of society – a society, that is very different from the perceptions and images that the Japanese people themselves have about their own society.

Nowadays in Japan the decline of total fertility rate has been recognized broadly. However, the decline has occurred not suddenly but instead is a consequence of a long-term pattern since the 1970s and has partly been overshadowed by prolonged lifespans and aging society, which for some time helped to hide the decrease of population. There have been social discourses on various reasons of the decline and why policy impacts have remained so limited. It is not a simple issue how total fertility rate develops as different socioeconomic and political factors function under the surface of statistics. In the following it is first explored how policy narratives have influenced the formulation of policy response to sluggish total fertility rate. Secondly, the discussion will focus on what kind of reforms have currently been implemented along with legal amendments in June 2016 and afterwards on public health services by population approach for maternal and child health and on child protection from abuse and advert childhood.

Regarding research methods, the relevant official documents and research literature will be reviewed. In analyzing policy narratives (see e.g. Jones et al., 2014), attention is drawn not only to what have explicitly been addressed but also to what have not been included in storytelling in the process of policy making. Moreover, author’s participatory observation in the process of formulating the centers of comprehensive support for child-rearing generations will be made use of too. The latter refers to retrospective reflections on author’s intended and unintended actions and role within the process of policy-making.