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The gender fault-line

AYAKO KANO AND VERA MACKIE

THE economic, demographic and environmental shocks of recent years that have so profoundly shaped contemporary Japanese society have distinctive gendered dimensions. The economic reality has shifted, but social expectations about the roles of men and women have been slower to change. Meanwhile, the demographic crisis is placing a considerable burden on families and revealing the attendant risk of the 'care deficit'—in the home and in the face of disaster.

The first of Japan's two more active periods of gender policy making came after the end of World War II. In 1946 the new constitution granted equal rights to both sexes and enumerated their social, legal and political rights. The following year equal pay for equal

work and maternity leave were made mandatory. The Equal Opportunity Employment Law (EEOL) of 1985 marked the beginning of the second period of gender policy making and coincided with Japan's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This was followed by the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society and other policy developments implemented during the recession years.

The EEOL has, to some extent, succeeded in outlawing direct discrimination against the new graduates who have been seeking employment in a shrinking economy. But the law does not change society's expectations that place the major responsibility for childcare on women

and for breadwinning on men. In contemporary Japanese society women are expected to manage the double burden of work and family, often by eschewing full-time work and a career.

Nearly 70 per cent of Japanese women 'choose' to leave the full-time workforce on the birth of their children. This also makes it easier for companies to channel male and female workers into different employment tracks, in violation of the spirit of the EEOL.

Both men and women are increasingly engaged in non-permanent employment. This is a result of deteriorating employment conditions, particularly for men in their 30s and 40s. Full-time employment eluded many in this group during the lost decade of the 1990s. Trapped in a succession of

unstable and low-wage jobs, many of these men were effectively shut out of a career, and also found it more difficult to marry because they were perceived as being incapable of supporting a family. Marginalised from both career and family, many felt deprived of a sense of belonging and social identity.

At around 1.37, Japan's total fertility rate is among the lowest in the world. Japan has the second-highest life expectancy in the world: 86 years for women and 79 years for men. It is estimated that by 2055 more than a third of the population will be over the age of 65. The productive population will thus decline, resulting in a shrinking tax base from which to provide pensions, welfare and medical care, and a smaller workforce to provide care for the elderly. The government's efforts to raise the birth rate have been ineffective. This has led some commentators to talk about a 'strike' by young people, who are marrying later, if at all, and who are having children later, or having fewer or no children.

Until the 1990s it seemed unimaginable that immigrant workers would be part of the solution for dealing with the care deficit, but the government is now moving slowly in this direction through bilateral agreements with Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Although a small number of people have passed the national examinations that allow them to stay long-term as certified nurses and carers, most of those entering Japan under these bilateral agreements will, in effect, be members of a rotating pool of short-term workers.

Non-profit organisations mediate the entry of such workers, and brokers who had hitherto helped entertainers or marriage migrants to enter

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Japan now focus on care workers. The immigrant brides who entered the country during the 1980s are increasingly engaged in care work—some in their marital households and others in more formal settings that require special training.

While Japan as a whole suffers the effects of the economic and demographic crises, these problems are most acutely felt in Northeast Japan. The population there was older and diminishing well before the Tohoku triple disaster. On 11 March 2011 less-mobile elderly people found it harder to reach safety and were less likely to be using the social media that were the major source of information on evacuation and relief. People over the age of 65 accounted for about two-thirds of bodies recovered. Communities already suffering from the economic recession, unemployment and the care deficit were plunged into a deeper crisis.


The effects of disasters are mediated by a society's existing structures and thus reveal its fault-lines. Although disaster planning since 2005 has explicitly noted the question of gender and national Plans for Gender Equality have explicitly mentioned disaster response, only 3.6 per cent of disaster preparedness council members at prefectural level were women. A

quarter of prefectures had no female members at all.

In many of the communities affected by the tsunami and its aftermath women were in charge of caring for others, and so had to deal with the short supply of sanitary napkins and nappies (for babies as well as the elderly), infant formula and baby food. The lack of privacy in shelters affected women especially, including nursing mothers.

Women have been conspicuously absent, not only from disaster planning and energy policy making, but from decision-making at all levels of Japanese society: women make up only 13 per cent of Diet members, 16.7 per cent of lecturers and above in higher education, 2 per cent of heads of government departments, and 4 per cent of CEOs.

In 2010 the CEDAW committee urged the Japanese government to undertake affirmative action to improve women's participation in decision-making positions in government, the bureaucracy and business. The government responded with a plan aimed at increasing the share of women in leadership positions to at least 30 per cent in all fields by 2020.

The economic, demographic and environmental crises of recent years have revealed the gendered fault-lines in contemporary Japanese society, and the urgent need for more gender-inclusive decision-making. 

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