

Toward Achievement of Work-Life Balance

Report on a two-year study (2008-2009)

International Committee of the Japanese Association of University Women

Introduction: JAUW Project on Work-Life Balance

The Japanese Association of University Women (JAUW) undertook a two-year project, between 2008 and 2009, on the theme “work-life balance.” The continuing decline in Japan’s birthrate has led government and business leaders to seek ways to promote work-life balance with the anticipation that doing so will have a beneficial effect both in terms of reversing this trend and promoting better utilization of women’s contribution to the growth of Japan’s economy. The JAUW decided to take up this timely and important issue and undertook a two-year project (2008-2009) investigating various aspects of this topic.

In November 2008, the JAUW held a symposium co-sponsored by the Japanese Government’s Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office, featuring a keynote speaker, a panel discussion, and presentations of research findings by JAUW regional branches and committees, and in October 2009, a two-day national seminar on the same topic was held, once again co-sponsored by the Gender Equality Bureau, with a panel discussion and several presentations by JAUW regional branches and committees.

Research on Work-Life Balance by the International Committee

As part of this project, the International Committee of the JAUW undertook research that proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, we sought to understand how some other countries are dealing with this issue of achieving work-life balance based on the principle of gender equality, and in 2008 the Committee conducted a questionnaire among the IFUW National Affiliates. In the second part of our research, undertaken in 2009, we looked, first of all, at three European countries where both the rate of men taking childcare leave and the percentage of women in employment have increased as a result of instituting various policies pertaining to employment and parental leave. In addition, we examined to what extent attempts have been made to eliminate gender bias and stereotyping and promote progressive attitudes regarding gender roles in school textbooks used in a number of countries. We present some of the findings from the International Committee’s reports on the two studies.

Part One: Research based on questionnaire survey of IFUW NFAs (2008)

I. Research objective

Our study took up the issue of work-life balance from the perspective that building a society based on this principle is critical to the more important goal of realization of gender equality in all aspects of personal and social life. From that perspective, in order for men and women to be able to share the responsibilities associated with both family life and work life on a more equitable basis, and in addition, to be able to choose which of the two they wish to place greater weight on depending on different stages in their lives, the following measures are essential:

- change work practices based on the premise that men are/should be the breadwinners and women are/should be responsible for housework and care work.

- make available affordable child day care as well as elderly/sick care facilities.
- promote the principle of gender equality and do away with traditional stereotypes regarding gender roles.

II. Research method

The questionnaire sent to the IFUW membership inquired about policies pursued in each country aimed at enabling both women and men to balance work with responsibilities related to the family—policies related to employment, such as options for part-time work, flexible work hours for both women and men, work-sharing, etc., provision of maternity/paternity leave, parental leave, childcare leave, provision of child care facilities and policies regarding leave for care of elderly and sick family members, and the adequacy and effectiveness to date of such measures and policies. We also asked about prevailing social attitudes regarding gender roles and educational efforts being made to promote progressive attitudes in this regard, especially among children and youth. Finally, we asked respondents for their views on what further concrete policies and measures were required in order to achieve better work-life balance in their society.

III. Findings from the survey (As of 2008 unless otherwise mentioned)

Eighteen of the IFUW National Affiliates generously responded to the questionnaire, and in addition, many of them sent us other valuable reference material relating to the issue: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Canada, Finland, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, Nepal, New Zealand, Nigeria, Russia, Scotland, Singapore, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland. Here are some of the findings from the survey including the materials referred to:

(1) Employment conditions and policies

In the majority of the respondent countries, we have found high ratio of double-income household. The working style is diverse whether it is full-time or part-time.

In Canada, Korea, Australia, Singapore and Sudan, there are more women working on a full-time basis while in Switzerland, Spain, Sweden and Argentina more women work on a part-time basis. Four associations replied they have no statistics available. Sweden stated that women work on a part-time basis by choice, though home-makers account for only about 2% in the entire population 20-64 years of age. Nepal answered that 81% of labor population is in agriculture, which makes us realize that such distinction does not always make much sense.

In many countries, however, women tend to retire or switch to a part-time job when they have a child. The biggest reason why women work part-time basis is that they cannot find day-care facilities. Korea is not alone in stating that going back to the same or similar work is hard for women after three to five years of child-care leave.

Wage gap between men and women is found in every country. Even in Sweden, where we expect little gender gap, it does exist. For example, women who have found their way into the fields where men dominate and earn good money are paid less than their male counterpart.

In Canada and Australia, poverty becomes a severer issue for women of particular groups; single mothers, migrants, natives, and rural residents and seniors. They suffer not

only from gender discrimination but also racial or social discrimination, which add to their difficulty in finding a job. Even if they get part-time jobs, retirement without pension is too insecure.

(2) Policies regarding maternity/child care leave

1) In all the respondent countries listed above, paid maternity leave inclusive of delivery leave is stipulated and available for employees under specified conditions. However, national provisions differ widely: in particular, in terms of (i) the purpose of the provision, (ii) the type of the contract (e.g. fixed-term, part-time, or temporary agency worker) and the job category, (iii) the size of the workplace (iv) the availability of paternity leave, and (v) the take-up rate.

2) In most of the respondent countries maternity leave is covered under health insurance or other social security programs, focusing either on the health of working mothers, or on halting the declining birthrate. However, we found that in a number of forward-thinking countries, parental leave, inclusive of maternity leave program, is enacted in view of the idea of gender equality and child welfare.

3) Most countries provide more than 10 weeks of paid maternity or delivery leave. In some Nordic countries, however, fathers are entitled to take parental leave of about 10 days per child with the arrival of a newborn or with adoption.

4) Swedish parents receive a parental-leave allowance of a high percentage (currently 80%) of their pre-birth salary for more than a year in connection with any birth. If they space their births sufficiently closely, they gain so-called a “speed premium”, which enables them to avoid a reduction in the allowance caused by any reduced income earned between the births due to childbearing and related newborn care.

5) We have observed a trend toward flexible working in New Zealand. In this country, Flexible Working Arrangement Act 2007 became effective in Aug. 2008, giving employees with caring responsibilities a statutory right to request flexible work. The review of the Act will continue till 2010 to consider whether the statutory right to request flexible work should be extended to all employees.

6) As of September 2008, Sweden and Finland are observed to be forerunners in terms of paternal leaves. Happily, however, strenuous efforts of the European Union and various other countries in Asia and Oceania seem to have worked favorably, as substantial improvement in terms of parental leave is foreseeable in the near future.

7) Even in Sweden, where generous parental leaves have been secured by law for each parent (480 days per child, of which 60 days are non-transferable between parents at the time of our investigation) the actual take-up rate of the parental leave among men in 2006 was around 20%, substantially lower compared with the rate for women (over 90%). Similar trends are observed in various other countries of the world. Persistent reluctance of top

business executives in connection with paternal leave accounts for extremely low rates of fathers' use of parental leaves. Business leaders fear that they have to undergo much heavier burdens to their business since both job participation and the level of salary for men are substantially higher compared with these for women.

(3) Provisions for child day care facilities

The provision for child day care facilities varies by countries and by regions even in a country. In Finland, such facilities are available for all children; in Kenya and Nepal, there is no public childcare facility but private and expensive ones are run in urban areas. So, women living in local areas, paid low or seeking jobs do not have access to them. In the meanwhile, such facilities are always filled to capacity in Canada and parents are obliged to wait.

Availability of official subsidies and the cost of day-care is naturally different from country to country. The wealth of parents is often a determining factor for access to such facilities. Relatives such as grand parents take care of children in every country.

Provision of adequate childcare support is a major issue not only for preschool age children but also for those already in school. In the case of Australia, "... the lack of availability of affordable, accessible, acceptable quality care for school aged children (6-15 years) out of school hours including during vacation, is a major cause of disadvantage in relation to women's work participation" (Security for Women 2008, 2).

In Singapore, in order to increase the birth rate, more national day-care facilities are planned and a subsidiary system for the users is going to be introduced in 2009.

(4) Policies regarding care of elderly and sick family members

The big factors determining the care of the elderly seem to be tradition and income. In Sweden and Finland, there is consensus that the nation should support elderly people. In Spain, the percentage of care at home and that in institutions is half and half. In Australia, Argentina, and Canada, the situation depends greatly on the ethnic background, education, and economic and social elements. In at least one responding nation, some elderly people end their lives on the street, while in another the civil war has split many families apart and many elderly people have been left behind.

In Korea, it is traditionally thought that the eldest son and his family should take care of the old parents. However, because of the high cost of private institutions of care, some families disagree strongly about how to provide such care. Kenya, Sudan, Mexico, and Nepal answered that they have a tradition that the elderly should be cared for at home.

In Australia, although there are some long-term care institutions, there are many instances of home care. However, care at home has become difficult because of recent aging trends, declining birth rate, and women's coming into the labor market.

Care at home or care in the institution

Type of care	# of countries	Names of countries
Mostly at home	5	Korea, Kenya, Sudan, Mexico, Nepal
Mostly in institutions	2	Sweden, Finland
Hard to say	4	Argentina, Australia, Canada, Spain

Family care-leave system

	# of countries	Names of countries
Having legal state system	7	Canada, Spain, Sweden, Korea, Finland, Russia, New Zealand
No care-leave system	4	Kenya, Sudan, Nepal, Mexico
No legal state system	3	Argentina, Australia, Singapore

As table above shows, 7 countries have legal care-leave systems. However, the details of the leave (e.g., paid or unpaid, or the length of the leave) vary among the countries.

In Sweden, where the socialization of care is prevalent, it is quite common that the elderly do not depend on their grown-up children. Still, it is remarkable that paid care-leave is given to carers.

Four countries answered that they do not have legal care-leave systems. However, among them, Singapore admits paid leave, not limited to care, as part of the employment-insurance scheme and individual labor-management agreements. Therefore, we cannot generalize about the overall situations only from the aspect of legal care-leave systems.

(5) Efforts to promote progressive attitudes toward gender roles

Attitudes pertaining to gender roles were found to vary according to sex, age, level of education, and region, but on the whole, traditional attitudes were found to be less prevalent among younger generations and those living in urban areas. Nevertheless, even in those countries where the concept of gender equality appears to have taken hold, traditional attitudes still seem to persist. In some cases, difficulties associated with men taking advantage of policies that in theory allow them to assume a greater domestic role, end up sustaining the traditional division of gender roles. For example, in the case of Scotland, the Equality and Human Rights Commission reports that “fathers—who increasingly want to spend more time with their children than was typical 40 or even 20 years ago—are reluctant to take paternity leave or longer parental leave or to seek flexibility, because of the career penalty or career death that may result. This means that, whatever a couple want to do, greater responsibility ends up being left to mothers, who in turn experience more of a penalty at work” (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2008,11-12). In the case of Canada, though apparently efforts undertaken have been made, nonetheless, there has been a definite effort to promote gender-neutral language. Sweden stands out as a country where an educational curriculum based on the principle of gender equality has been put in place at all levels starting from early childhood.

(6) Respondents’ Comments [Excerpt] on their society and desirable measures for the future

Argentina: There are no specific social security policies (to realize WLB) but current socio-cultural trends and women organization efforts work to keep on winning new spaces. Ex.

Enormous changes in the field of women legislative representation; 35% in the House of Representative, 43% in the Senate, 20% in the State and other local legislative level.

Australia: Universal paid maternity leave, better childcare provisions and better recognition of the work of carers would be a good beginning. Use of the tax system to alleviate the historical disadvantage that women have experienced (and to achieve) superannuation funds to meet their needs in old age.

Canada: (What is needed includes) Affordable, licensed and reliable day care, pensions to improve conditions for women in retirement, political representation, gender education for all teachers, prevention of harassment/violence against women, pay equity, benefits for part-time and contract work

Finland: Finland is a pretty open-minded country and we have a lot of legalization about the equality between men and women. Both genders are full members of society, work, and split their homework. At the moment, the government is working to get salaries on the same level.

Kenya: Grass root education of women, such as on labor law, to understand their rights and know where they can turn to; more activism to enable women to access justice; implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the success of some of the policies on the ground

Korea: It takes time to change attitudes and beliefs. It has to be integrated from young ages in textbooks and also school teachers (should) encourage the parents to practice what school teaches in gender roles. Korean government passed the “Equal Employment Act” supporting “Work/Family Balance” on Dec. 27, 2007. I would like to encourage the government to introduce the law and its background through many channels of media and upcoming opportunities.

Mexico: The government should work for the citizenship and not to make themselves richer. Positive changes have happened, but it is not enough. Discrimination against women, indigenous people, and homosexual people must disappear or, at least, decrease.

Nepal: Senior Citizens Act (2006) has clearly prescribed that it is the duty of family member to take care and feed the elder member of family. ... Elderly people have virtually no security if they are not looked after by their own family members as 31% of the people live below poverty line. ... Increasing trend of migration of children outside the country for study and work and women joining labor market has forced (not only the helpless and discarded seniors but) even well-to-do elders to live in elderly home in urban areas. Timely actions by the government and concerned authorities (should be brought about).

Russia: The Moscow City Government is holding a city contest from March 1 to October 1, 2008 called “The Best Company for Working Moms.” The goal of the contest is to identify and support companies that have created the best conditions for the professional growth of, and fulfillment of family duties by working mothers, as well as for their social support and moral encouragement. The contest will be specially focused on estimating the collective

bargaining agreements signed by Moscow-based companies ... (for) creating favorable conditions for working mothers.

Singapore: The traditional notion of women as fulltime housewives is eroding slowly but surely. However, the role of men as exclusively breadwinners is still firmly entrenched. ... Formal efforts to change the imbalance and help men take on more childrearing and domestic roles are few and hesitant. (The family-friendly policies by the government) may eventually impact gender-role attitudes indirectly. However, unless more is done to level the field, the reversal in falling birthrates may not be realized any time soon.

Spain: I personally think they (gender division) have improved enormously in the past 20 years. What is needed are more public day care centers for childcare and many more public centers for the care of the elderly.

Sudan: People should be treated more equally and chances of work should be available for both sexes. Many students are graduated from universities but remained without any jobs.

Switzerland: Promoting participation by both women and men in childcare and care of the sick and elderly requires not only legislative support but also changes in people's attitudes regarding gender roles.

IV. Analysis of the data and observations

Data obtained from the 18 NFAs who responded to our questionnaire reveal that

1. the goal of achieving WLB has yet to be fully realized in any of the countries,
2. men's lives continue to be heavily weighted toward work, while women assume most of the responsibilities related to the home and family,
3. existing policies and work practices force many women to withdraw from the workplace or switch to part-time work, and
4. in the northern European countries where WLB-related policies are most firmly in place, the principle of gender equality is widely accepted, and men are more likely to perform responsibilities related to the home and family, both labor participation among women as well as the birthrate tends to be higher,
5. in contrast, in those countries where the working environment does not meet the needs of women with families, and moreover, traditional attitudes toward gender roles remain strong both within society as a whole and within the family, many women are unable to combine work outside the home with family responsibilities even if they wish to do so, and these conditions contribute to the low fertility rates (Shorto 2008).

V. Proposals for what need to be done

To promote women's economic independence and at the same time make it possible for both men and women to take part in care giving work, policies regarding child care and care of elderly/sick family members, as well as flexible/shortened work hours must be strengthened. Moreover, in order that workers are not penalized in any way for taking care leave, it ought to be made mandatory to some degree for both men and women.

Lack of adequate measures for realizing work-life balance, combined with the persistence of traditional attitudes regarding normative roles for women and men persist in society, are significant factors underlying Japan's low fertility rate. In order to make any progress we need to tackle the challenge of changing those outdated attitudes. As the European Commission's report strongly asserts, "Stereotyping constitutes a barrier to individual choice for both men and women...Action to combat gender-based stereotypes must start at a very young age and should promote behavior models which value individual choices of education pathways and support equality between men and women, also in the sharing of domestic and family duties." The report goes on to say, "The media as a whole must participate in efforts to tackle stereotypical images of women and men and must promote a realistic image of their abilities" (European Commission 2008, 11).

Part Two: Research conducted in 2009

I. Work-life balance policies in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands

The second phase of the International Committee's research involved, first of all, looking specifically at the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany and seeing how the measures adopted in those countries in the recent years may have contributed to promoting work-life-balance.

In the United Kingdom, the Blair government's Work Life Balance Campaign implemented from 2000, introduced flexible work patterns such as Compressed Hours (providing option to work different number of hours each day so long as the total hours for the week are met) and Term-time Work (allowing employees to work only during school terms).

In Germany, the Parental Allowance (2007) guaranteed a certain percentage of income for parents on childcare leave for up to 14 months, but with the provision that in the case of two-parent families, the length of time one of the parents can receive this allowance is limited to 12 months. This gave a strong incentive for fathers to take leave for at least 2 months, and by 2008, men comprised 20% of those taking parental leave.

The Netherlands has been at the forefront in promoting diversified work styles, guaranteeing equal labor conditions as well as welfare benefits for part-time and full-time workers (Prohibition of Discrimination on Work Hours Law 1996), making it possible for dispatched workers to negotiate with the employer to become a full-time employee after a certain length of time (Flexicurity Law 1999) and allowing workers to switch from full- to part-time work and vice versa and to determine the number of hours they wish to work per week (Work Hour Adjustment Law 2000). These and other measures have resulted in the percentage of men taking parental leave reaching 21% in 2006. The comparable figure among Japanese men was a mere 1.23 in 2008 (over 90% among women).

II. Tackling gender-stereotyping in textbooks

Promoting work-life balance based on the principle of gender equality requires not only changes in employment and other policies but also in attitudes regarding gender roles. Studies indicate that in textbooks throughout the world, females are greatly underrepresented, and moreover, gender-stereotyped portrayals of female and male attitudes and traits as well as

occupational and domestic roles persist (Blumberg 2007). Yet such biases and stereotypes are difficult to detect unless we make a very conscious effort to look for and analyze them carefully.

In the second part of the research we undertook in 2009, we looked specifically at illustrations and pictures contained in elementary school textbooks from New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Argentina, published between 1985 and 2006, and found depictions of boys and girls and women and men that transcended gender stereotypes—e.g., girls playing soccer, boys and men doing chores like washing dishes and cooking, girls and boys together jumping rope or using a hammer and saw to build something, men performing household chores and bathing and changing babies’ diapers, women physicians and women operating heavy machinery.

III. Lessons for Japan

Measures on the part of governments in the various countries we examined to create new employment options as well as improved childcare support and to counteract traditional gender roles and eliminate gender stereotyping through education, offer valuable models for Japan. While we have seen some advances in attempts to eradicate gender-stereotyping in Japanese textbooks particularly since the enactment of the Basic Law for Gender-equal Society in 1999, we should take note that the CEDAW Committee, in its concluding observation of Japan’s most recent report to the Committee, called upon the Japanese government “to further enhance its efforts and to take proactive and sustained measures to eliminate stereotypical attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men,” and “to enhance the education and in-service training of the teaching and counseling staff of all educational establishments and at all levels with regard to gender equality issues and to speedily complete a revision of educational textbooks to eliminate gender stereotyping” (CEDAW 2009).

Traditional attitudes regarding gender roles, which are still quite prevalent in Japan, are a major hindrance to the progress of gender equality and achievement of work-life balance for both women and men. To overcome this obstacle, we must seriously heed the above recommendations by CEDAW.

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