Japan case study:

Changing policies on the work-life balance in response to demographic challenges

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1. Introduction

This case study is implemented within the project 'Fostering policy support for child and family wellbeing - Learning from international experience'. Using a thematic and analytic framework for the project that draws on Kingdon's multi-streams theory,[2] we are gathering and sharing evidence and learning on what has led to increased policy recognition of and policy change in family and child health and wellbeing (FCHW). In specific countries that have demonstrated policy recognition and change in FCHW post 2000, we are exploring within their context how different policy actors have come together to raise policy attention, develop policy options and promote their political adoption as processes for policy change, taking advantage of windows of opportunity for that change. The case studies were implemented with a local focal person with direct knowledge or experience of the policy process and include evidence from published and grey literature and interview of key informants involved in the policy processes.

This case study explores the policy and legal changes post 2000 in supporting the work-life balance (WLB) of families with children in a context of the social and economic challenges posed by declining fertility and an ageing population.

A demographic 'shock' of an ageing population with low fertility opened an opportunity to address long-term workplace practices and gender norms and WLB demands that discourage female employment and family size. With a weak civil society and strong business influence, a significant body of research shared also in the media brought evidence on and gave voice to the concerns of working women and families on workplace and domestic cultures and norms, and showed their link to declining fertility, drawing policy attention to addressing workplace cultures and the WLB.

Policy development took place within an organised and incremental process that was led by collectives of competent Japanese state actors, with technical committees and other forums to consult and communicate with key stakeholders. This was backed by investment in university training to support state capacities. Notwithstanding the relatively stable political system, the accumulating evidence and pressure from opposition parties generated attention from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party. Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe provided strong political leadership for the adoption of WLB and workplace reforms, positioning the changes as an economic strategy, 'Abenomics' and 'Womanomics', and as a vital investment to address the labour demands and future of the economy. These signals and incentives for uptake of workplace reforms drew support from previously opposed business interests, with voluntary measures becoming mandatory as norms shifted and systems introduced to monitor policy uptake and performance. While social attitudes are changing, changing gender norms has been more difficult to achieve. Campaigns have been implemented to challenge male stereotypes on child care and to give visible support to male 'pathbreaker' roles in family and child care, to shift norms.

Further changes are seen as necessary to promote women as managers, to close wage gaps between permanent and temporary workers and to further improve the WLB. Such policy and normative change is acknowledged to take time, with a need to convince key actors on the pathway.

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2. The context

Japan is a high-income country in Asia with a population in 2018 of 127 million. The country had a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US$38 640 in 2018 and a small rise in inequality to a Gini coefficient of 0.34 in 2015 (OECD, 2019). It was ranked 6th of OECD countries on five dimensions of child wellbeing in 2013 (material, health and safety, education, behaviors and risks, housing and environment). Infant mortality is low, falling from 4.6 in 1990 to 2.3 by 2010. Most children live with two parents (87.6%) (Abe and Takezawa, 2013; OEDC, 2019; UNdata, 2019).

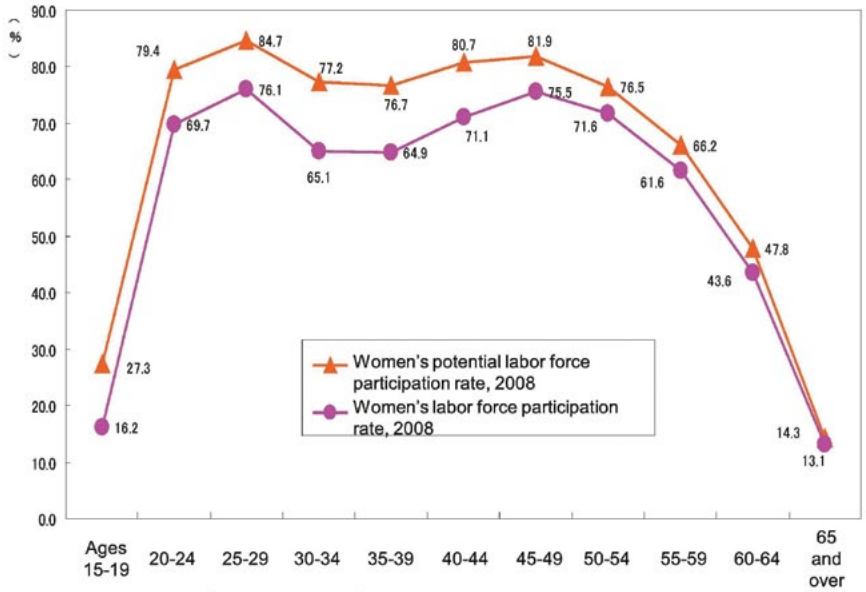
Map of Japan P Gray 2016

The country is, however, experiencing a demographic challenge. Japan's fertility rate fell after the 1940s and reached a low 1.26 by 2005, while the country has the highest global growth in the ageing population, leading to a fall in the population.

A rising share of people aged over 65 years, projected to reach 40% by 2050, and a falling share of 0-14 year olds at 13% in 2018, means that while there were 12 workers for every retiree in the 1970s, there will only be one for every retiree by 2050 (WPR, 2019). The fertility decline is attributed to marriage later in life, advances in women's education and employment and difficulties in balancing child care and work (NIPSSR, 2003).

Women's employment situation

Many women leave the labor market when they give birth to children and start child care. The gap between the actual labor force participation rate and the potential labor force participation rate is particularly wide for parenting-age women.



- Women's labor force population: 27.62 million (men: 38.88 million)
- Women's labor force participation rate - Age 15 and over: 48.4% (men: 72.8%)
  Ages 15-64: 62.3% (men: 85.2%)

Source: "Labour Force Survey" and "Labour Force Survey Detailed Tabulation" (2008), Statistics Bureau, MIC

Women's economic activity rose significantly from the mid-1990s. Female university graduates rose 12-fold from 1968 to 12 million in 2007 and female employment rose from 5 million in 1953 to 23.5 million in 2011 (Ikezoe, 2014).

These trends raised new challenges for the balance between work and family responsibilities. Japanese society still holds traditional notions of gender roles, and the country has *one of the highest socioeconomic development levels with least gender equality among high-income nations* (Fukuda, 2017: 2; Ito, 2019). Large Japanese companies expect employees to demonstrate commitment to the company, creating a difficult balancing act for working mothers (Schoppa, 2006; Takahashi et al., 2014; Yu, 2009).

A combination of long working hours and frequent overtime, a gender pay gap, tax disincentives and the expectation that working women take on the demands of household work and care have led to 60% of women to leave employment around childbirth. Added to this, workplace gender norms and corporate cultures discourage female employment and mothers returning to work faced difficulties in finding regular jobs and were compelled to take part time or temporary agency jobs (OECD, 2012; Mun and Brinton, 2015, Ito, 2019).

Men play little role in child and elderly care and household chores. In a competitive environment, many women leave work to support their children's schooling. While public preschools are free, the high combined costs of private preschool and child care costs lead women to leave work to take on child-care, to be able to afford private preschools.

Japanese family, Wikimedia, undated

Company managements, while concerned about the long term economic conequences of the ageing population, gave low priority to these work–life balance issues (Sato, 2012; Mun and Brinton, 2015). Permanently employed workers, mainly men, have had greater job and benefit security, albeit with longer hours of work. Companies preferred to hire on workers less secure contracts, with more variable benefits and limited job security. The tax/benefit system also created disincentives for second earners in couple families (usually women) to work (OECD, 2012).

When in 1981 measures to address the child care burden were being considered, the four largest business groups in the country (Japanese Federation of Employer Associations (Nikkeiren), Japanese Chamber of Commerce, The Japan Committee for Economic Development and the Federation of Economic Organizations submitted a statement to the *Diet* (the legislature) opposing legislating childcare leave, arguing that it would burden firms.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) abandoned an intention to change the law and resisted advocacy to do so (Lambert, 2007). In the 1980s, business argued for reduced welfare spending in economic downturns and the Diet approved cuts to child care in 1985, despite petitions from childcare and parent groups against this (Lambert, 2007).

3. The policy change

In the early 1990s, as the national birth rate hit the lowest ever recorded, the Japanese economic bubble burst, creating a national sense of anxiety about the future and generating debate about women's role in the home and workplace (Shirahase 2007). The demographic changes and the economic demand for female labour called for some change in social norms that positioned women as care providers and men as breadwinners, and in corporate cultures and environments that were inhospitable for working mothers (Mun and Brinton, 2015).

This section describes the policy and institutional reforms that took place in Japan post 2000 towards a more supportive work-life balance for women and for their children, while the subsequent sections describe how they came about.

The policy changes reflected an intention to create a more favourable environment for women to work, have children and balance the demands of working life and child care. They included an improved supply of accredited child care, improved parental leave benefits and support for their uptake, incentives for men to play a greater role in child care, more flexible working conditions for workers with children and improved housing, education and health services for families with children. Work-Life Balance as a concept was given greater profile in Japan by researchers at the beginning of the 2000s. The synonymous term *'shigoto to seikatsu no chouwa"* proposed by the Japanese government become more widely used in discussions and seminars (Ikezoe, 2014).

The Japanese government implemented a series of policies to address obstacles faced by working mothers. An Angel Plan (1994-1998), also known as the 'Basic Direction for Future Childrearing Support Measures', updated in a New Angel Plan (1999-2003) set commitments to expand childcare services, to make it more accessible, including provision of childcare services during weekends and holidays, with subsidies to promote uptake of parental leave and shorter working hours (Fujisaki and Ohinata 2010). The New Angel Plan aimed to make the employment environment more flexible for workers with children, with more support for families through public policies for improved housing, education and maternal and child health care (Center for Public Impact, 2017). These policy commitments motivated changes in law and systems that are outlined below, summarized in the timeline overleaf and in the diagram in *Annex 1*.

In 2003, the government enacted the *Basic Act for Measures to Cope with Society with Declining Birthrate,* as a means to create a more **supportive environment for childbirth and for raising children**, including for men to play a greater role in child care (Harris, 2006). A *Next Generation Law* (2003) required employers with more than 100 workers to prepare and submit to local government a 'Business owner action plan' on what they would do to improve conditions for improved fertility, such as in relation to maternity and paternity leave (Harris, 2006). A *Plus one* policy encouraged families to grow by "plus one" by creating parent-friendly working conditions, with funds for construction of 50,000 new daycare facilities (Centre for Public Impact, 2017). In 2007 the maternity leave pay was increased to 66% of daily earnings (CESifo DICE, 2014).

Between 2001 and 2009 improvements were made to the **eligibility for and level of parental leave benefits.** In 2001 government took over both employee and employer contributions to social security while on parental leave and increased the childcare and family leave cash benefit to 40%, although only workers with a long (indefinite) term contract working at a firm that employs more than 30 workers were eligible for these benefits. By 2005, workers on limited-term contracts were included in eligibility for parental leave after a year or more of employment and the cash benefit was raised to 50% (Yamaguchi, 2016). A 2009 revision meant that 50% of the wage could be paid before taking leave, paid from employee insurance funds (Employment Insurance Act) (Ikezoe, 2014).

In 2010, parental leave became an individual entitlement, allowing a parent to take leave whether or not their partner is also on leave, with the leave extended from a year to until the child turns 14 months if parents are both taking leave, incentivizing shared leave. This time could also be further extended if there are two or more children in the family, or if the child is injured or ill (CESifo DICE, 2014).

Timeline of policy and legal reforms on the worklife balance

Year	Policy/ law/ program/institution
Pre 2000 1990-1995	1990: An Inter-ministry committee *Creating a Sound Environment for Bearing and Rearing Children* is established; 1991: A *Childcare Leave Act* provides working mothers and fathers one-year of job protected leave as the first of a series of changes in family policy. 1992: Parental Leave (PL) introduced offering job protection for limited employee types until the child reaches age one and no cash benefits. 1994: The Angel Plan is published by government to address low birthrate and plan daycare and child care services.
1995- 1999	1995: *Childcare and Family Care Leave Act* introduces cash benefits (25% pay) for workers on indefinite contract; Council on Population Problems publishes 'Basic ideas on a decrease in the number of children' pointing to the need to address gender-based roles
2000	Work-Life Balance as a concept is given greater profile by researchers Government pays full contributions to social security while on parental leave
2001	The childcare and family leave benefit increases to 40% on monthly pay and government meets employee and employer contributions to social security during parental leave.
2002	Government encourages revision of working styles including those of men and restructures the dependent children's allowance
2003	*Basic Act for Measures to Cope with Society and Declining Birthrate and Act on advancement of measures to support raising next-generation children* passed. A *Next Generation Law* requires large employers to submit a plan on support of working parents.
2004	A New Angel Plan produced
2005	Workers on limited-term contract included as eligible for PL if employed for over a year
2007	Shinzō Abe appointed as Prime Minister. The first Minister of State for Measures for Declining Birthrate is appointed. A Charter for Work-Life Balance and an Action Policy is drawn up by state, business, labour and local authority leaders. The policy seeks to change corporate culture and to promote a balance between child-rearing, with measures to reduce long working hours, encourage workers to take annual paid leave, promote flexible working hours and working from home. The cash benefit is raised to 50% of monthly pay and maternity leave pay increased to 66% of daily earnings.
2009	The *Employment Insurance Act* amendment provides that 50% of the wage is paid before taking leave from employee insurance funds as a childcare leave benefit. The Angel Plan is revised to strengthen childcare support and passed unanimously by the Japanese Diet.
2010	A new agreement on work-life and care balance is concluded between top executives of government, labour, and employers. Parental leave becomes an individual entitlement. The Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare launches the national *Ikumen Project* promoting male involvement in childcare. *Womanomics* discussed in Cabinet
2014	The child care leave allowance paid out of employment insurance funds is increased
2015	The Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childcare (CSSCC) is launched within the reform of the social security and tax system with unified early child education and care centers given formal status, boosting their numbers. Law reform prohibits unfair treatment due to pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, family care leave. A 2015 *Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace* strengthens female workers' rights and a Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality is adopted.

Sources: NIPSSR, 2003; Enzawa and Fufiwara 2005; Lambert, 2007; Haub, 2010; Taguma et al., 2012; Ikezoe, 2014; Sakaue and Ogawa, 2016; Yamaguchi, 2016; Sakaue and Ogawa, 2016; HRW, 2017

From the earlier concerns with promoting fertility, policies later in the decade began to take on **gender roles and wider employment conditions affecting the work-life balance**. A 2007 Charter for Work-Life Balance and an associated Action Policy drawn up by business, labour and local authorities and various laws encouraged changes to men's working styles and corporate cultures to be more supportive of family roles. They reduced long working hours, encouraged workers to take annual paid leave and promoted flexible working hours, teleworking and working from home (Ikezoe, 2014). In 2010, the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare launched the national *Ikumen* Project to promote an image of masculinity and heroism as being involved in childcare, to encourage greater paternal involvement in family life. This is discussed later in the paper.

A 2015 *Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace* to strengthened the rights of female workers, requiring that employers prevent their unfair treatment due to pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, family care leave (HRW, 2017). With Japan having the second lowest proportion of female managers among OECD countries, in 2015, Japan's Cabinet adopted a new five-year *Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality,* with a target to ensure that at least 30% of leadership positions are held by women in all areas by 2020 and 15% of middle managerial positions in the private sector (HRW, 2017). In the same year, a Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childcare (CSSCC) was launched as part of the **integrated reform of the social security and tax system.** Unified early child education and care centers were given status as both education and welfare facilities, connecting childcare to related services (Sakaue and Ogawa, 2016).

There is some evidence of the effect of these policies: the preschool enrollment rate by 2011 was 98%, with 4 165 nursery facilities within places of business attended by 61 000 children and childcare leave taken by 83.6% of mothers in 2012 (Abe and Takewaza, 2013; Ikezoe, 2014). Data in 2012 still showed a low uptake of childcare leave by fathers (1.9%) pointing to the further measures needed to improve this (Ikezoe, 2014). Government set targets in 2015 to raise by 2020 (i) the share of men taking paternity leave to 80% and taking state-subsidised childcare leave for up to one year to 13% (from 2% in 2013) and (ii) the share of women retaining their jobs after the birth of their first child to 55% (from 38% in 2010) (Centre for Public Impact, 2017).

The share of women continuing work using childcare leave rose from 8.1% in 1990-94 to 17.1% in 2005-9 (Matsuda, 2015). As shown in the figure above, the average weekly work hours of permanent-contract employees in the child-rearing age band of 25–39 years declined post 2013 for male and female workers and even more sharply after 2004 for married women workers (Nagase, 2018). Surveys conducted between 2000 and 2014 found significant changes to attitudes about gender roles and men's contributions, but far less change to working habits and the sexual division of labour, terming it an *incomplete revolution* (Htun et al., 2018:1).

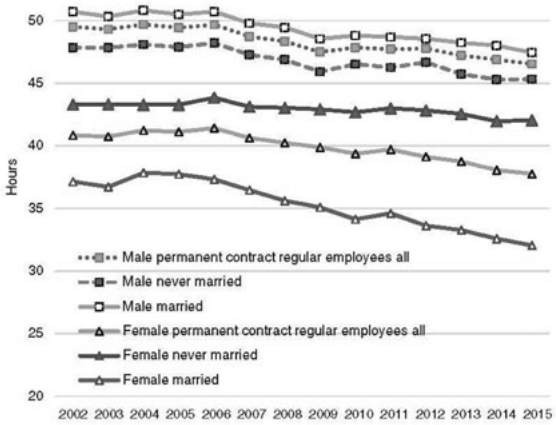


Figure 3 Weekly hours worked by *Permanent-contract regular employees* aged 25–39 years. Source: Computed by the author using microdata from the *Labor Force Survey*.

Source: Nagase, 2018:76

Household economic concerns motivating a delay in childbirth contrasted with national economic concerns over the consequent fall in the number of workers (by 10 million by 2030) (Centre for Public Impact, 2017). Work-life balance policies thus brought two parallel strands of policy together; social support for working women at work and in the home, and policies related to the economic impact of the falling birth-rate and ageing population (Takahashi et al., 2014). The policy changes described sought to address both, linking the balance of personal and work lives to Japan's economic strength.

The next section discusses the actors, actions, processes and relationships that contributed to these policy changes, and the unresolved issues in these two concurrent strands.

4. The story of the change

4.1 Demographic shock and evidence raising the issue on the policy agenda

As noted in earlier, there were economic, labour market, social and normative motivations for policy change. This section explores how the demand was raised for a more comprehensive policy approach for the work-life balance.

The pressures for a new approach emerged from the "1.57 shock" in 1989 of the lowest birthrate in recorded history and a projection of a further fall in the total fertility rate to 1.16 by 2020. This itself drew policy attention. It provoked a significant media coverage and public reaction and a range of actions to understand the causes, particularly from surveys of working people, couples and communities (Centre for Public Impact, 2017).

While women were most affected by the work culture and social effects of slow changes in gender norms, they were often silent and weakly organized collectively. Social perceptions of different and specialized roles for men and women persisted (Kato et al., 2018). Women who spoke out were viewed as an embarrassment or nuisance, even by other women (Ito, 2019). A Gender Equality Office in the Prime Minister's Secretariat was upgraded in 2001 to a bureau in the Cabinet Office, to promote women's social advancement. The *Equal Opportunity Law* passed in the 1980s aimed to address gender discrimination, but with a slow real change in men's roles, it placed the burden of change on women. When, after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the 1999 *Basic Law for Gender Equal Society* was passed, it linked gender equality to concerns with low birth rates. Some gender activists argue that such limited reforms may have even weakened collective gender equality activism in its own right (Ito, 2019).

Before the 1980s trade unions in Japan had been highly organized and militant, particularly around wage negotiations, with an average of 6000 strikes a year. A significantly weaker electoral performance by the Japan Socialist Party in the 2000s, less tolerance of labour activism by the LDP and a shift from permanent to 'irregular' employment weakened the unions. Their membership fell from 55% in the 1970s to 18% by 2012 (Penn, 2013). Unions were also reported to pay less attention to irregular and insecure workers, many of whom were women (Penn, 2013). While women were taking on significant burdens, a weak civil society and unions diminished the social voice on the policy changes needed and left workers often unaware of even those WLB reforms that had been introduced. A negative view of social activism added to this: *People who attempt to exercise their rights in Japan are frequently labelled 'selfish', while there is a strong tendency to regard those who practice silent endurance of difficult situations as 'virtuous* (Takahashi et al., 2014:20).

Research findings thus played an important role throughout the 2000s in pointing to changing social conditions and causes of labour shortfalls and to the negative consequences of traditional gender norms and corporate cultures that positioned women as care providers and men as breadwinners.

Research surveys provided a more credible vehicle in the context for raising the concerns of working women and families and for opening debate on problematic norms, including those held by business, taking advantage of the attention raised by demographic and labour market concerns.

a. **Research evidence gave voice to family concerns,** pointing to the gap between people's aspirations on the number of children they wanted and the pressures they faced in achieving this. While a 1997 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare survey found that over 90% of couples wanted to have at least two children, which would raise the fertility rates, surveys showed the barriers families faced in this aspiration, particularly from competing work and care roles for the increasing number of women entering the labour market (Centre for Public impact, 2017; Kato et al., 2018). A growing body of WLB research gave voice to women's views on this and on the changes they felt would enable them to work and have a family and their male partners to take support child care. Women proposed reducing working hours, making child care leave mandatory, permitting telecommuting and covering the employee's entire salary during child care leave.

The research also drew attention to where women were getting support for dealing with WLB pressures, such as from peer-led parenting groups and in on-line discussions and forums (Holloway and Nagese, 2014).

b. **Research evidence also highlighted the impact of the corporate and work culture in the WLB.** Studies provided evidence of how long working hours placed a pressure on men and discouraged their participation in child care and housework (Kato et al., 2018). They pointed to how organizational cultures can discourage employees from taking advantage of parental and other leave policies, raising a conflict between family time and care and a social image of the ideal worker working long hours in a 24/7 commitment to work (Perlow, 1998; Gottfried and Hayashi-Kato, 1998; Thompson et al., 1999; Blair-Loy and Jacobs, 2003; Drago et al., 2006; Cha, 2010; Turco, 2010; Damaske et al., 2014). The studies exposed how the management culture and women's lower status in the workplace weakened uptake of parental leave. In contrast, a study of over 500 large Japanese companies between 2001 and 2009 found a higher uptake of parental leave in companies with more women in managerial positions and as human resources executives (Mun and Brinton, 2015).

c. **Research evidence made a link between these family and corporate issues and decisions on fertility.** Evidence from countries internationally was used to point to low fertility to being associated with *a much faster pace of women's advancements in economic roles than men's participation in domestic roles* (Fukuda, 2017:2). Research evidence highlighted how fertility decline in Japan was associated with a rise in dual-income households and delayed marriage, itself linked to improved levels of education and career motivations in women that were unmatched by male progress (Fukuda, 2017). A growing body of WLB research provided evidence of how the low uptake of parental leave amongst men arose from cultural expectations and corporate pressures; as men who wanted to take paternity leave decided not to do due to a "perceived group norm" against it (Steger, 2017; MHLW, 2010; Nagase 2018).

d. **Some studies moved beyond the causes of problems to evidence to inform policy responses.** Studies noted that men's participation in child-care had a greater influence on improved fertility than their participation in other domestic work (Kato et al., 2018). Other studies provided data to highlight the imbalance between social security benefits paid out to elderly people and those paid to families with children (55% vs 4% respectively), to make the case for investment in more comprehensive parental leave and child care services (Centre for Public Impact, 2017).

Mother and child in Japan, Pixfuel, undated

As these findings emerged, there was some increase in social debate. Some male company leaders, such as Mr Yoshihisa Aono, Cybozu, Inc., began to speak out on the need for an improved WLB. Female scholars, individual women in politics and individual companies also raise work-life and other issues facing women workers, although these individual voices were often overshadowed by the wider socio-cultural context noted earlier.

Japanese media picked up and amplified outreach of research findings and of people's struggles around family life. For example, media reported cases of discriminatory practices in the workplace acting as a barrier to men who wanted to use their paternity leave benefit, with long approval processes for paid paternity leave by some employers and subsequent loss of jobs, position or eligibility for paid child care benefits (McCrostie, 2018). Other media stories described how fathers taking paternity leave in the private sector in 2014 *are given a hard time for even applying* (Aoki, 2016:1).

In 2010, building on an advertising concept, the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare launched a national *Ikumen Project* to promote the idea of men taking care of children as heroic, masculine and 'cool', to encourage paternal involvement in family life. Men associated with the campaign were supported by *Work-life Balance Handbooks* to help them juggle the competing demands of office and home. Media amplified this image into an *Ikumen boom* from 2010, on the one hand profiling the death and suicide from excessive work and overtime and on the other projecting heroic male figures caring for children in magazines like FQ (Father's Quarterly), in a 'Mr Ikumen pageant', an Ikumen Club, as leads in a popular TV series reading stories to their children and in 'Bunny Drop', a film of a man bringing up a child (Hughes, 2011; Robson, 2018).

Notwithstanding its key role, there is some critique that the WLB research and social advocacy focused more on large corporations and their workers, that it took female work for granted and placed pressure on men to succeed at home without reducing their pressure to over-perform in the workplace (Robson, 2018). The situation and concerns of those working in small- or middle-sized firms, in fact the majority of workers, and of precarious workers in multiple low-paid jobs to make ends meet were not well covered in the research. This bias can direct policy attention to specific concerns to the exclusion of others (Toivonen, 2011). It has also been raised that WLB research has responded to economic concerns on fertility and ageing, but given less focus to contesting the gender norms defining male and female roles, noting that a change in social norms demands changes at a scale that cannot simply be studied at company level (Takahashi et al., 2015)

The research did, however, raise policy attention and open debates on deeply rooted social mindsets. The body of WLB research that grew in the 2000s, the media amplification of this evidence and social campaigns like *Ikumen* drew attention to WLB concerns and their causes, linking findings to policy concerns on fertility decline. It gave a credible voice to the experience of workers and women in a context that discouraged social activism and introduced a discourse that differed from that of the influential large companies on what needed to be tackled. The government policy response is discussed in the next subsection.

4.2 Developing and monitoring policy options

While the profile of WLB rose on the policy agenda, there continued to be debate throughout the 2000s on how to address it, with evidence and interests informing policy options, as explored in this section.

The analysis of qualitative data and findings from nationwide surveys showed that the gap between workplace, family policies and people's practices was caused in large part by gendered working patterns. As described earlier, these patterns normalized long working hours and work-centered lives for men and forced women to choose between work and childcare, with many women chosing to leave their jobs following childbirth. The policy debate thus focused on both workplace and family practices. If the gap between a relatively high degree of gender equality in employment and a low degree of gender equality in family life is diagnosed as the major cause of low fertility, then formal measures to relieve the burden of child care on women were seen as necessary to enhance fertility, such as support for childcare services and incentives for male roles in childcare (Fukuda, 2017).

Under the initiative of the Prime Minister, various high-level committees and technical working groups were established by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) and other related ministries within their sectors to review evidence and dialogue on policy options and to design policy measures (NIPSSR, 2003). They involved officials and relevant stakeholders from academia, researchers, business and civil society. While business had an important role in these committees, ministry leads were also able to use formal and informal networks to bring in advocates for change or sources of technical evidence and to draw information from a wider spectrum of implementers, managers, local government actors and opinion leaders. The committees in the Cabinet office and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry were influential, co-ordinating the high-level inputs across sectors, particularly as fertility, ageing and the WLB became increasingly linked to economic outcomes. The committee work, while responding to political and policy signals, was largely driven and informed by state officials. They drew learning on what was happening in other high-income countries, but developed the policies locally. State capacities for this were supported by public investment in universities and a view of state employment as desirable by high-skilled graduates.

One key policy issue to negotiate was how to address the workplace factors that were discouraging uptake of existing policies on child care and leave. This meant addressing the tension between the Japanese government's promotion of parental leave policies in the 2000s and the evidence of a less-than supportive corporate culture (Mun and Brinton 2015). Under the leadership of Shinzō Abe in 2006-7, government advocated reductions in the amount of overtime work. Negotiations were held by government with employers and unions to produce a 2007 *Charter for Work-Life Balance* and an Action Policy for it.

This gave direction to the 2009 legal reforms developed by government officials that obliged employers to reduce working hours, provide flexible working hours and exemptions from overtime work and to improve support for workers to take annual paid leave and parental leave. To address employer concerns, return to the company after taking parental leave was incentivised by only a portion of leave pay being paid by the employment insurance system during the leave itself, with the remaining portion paid 6 months after the return to work. In practice, however, many firms still created their own rules about the timing of leave payments *to motivate those employees who do not intend to come back to work after a leave to simply quit instead* (Mun and Brinton, 2015:9).

This drew attention to the need to address parental leave provisions as a matter of wider public policy, to provide child care leave benefits in a way that would enable workers to take child care leave more easily and to facilitate their smooth return to work. Over the 2000s therefore policy changes were introduced in stages, with monitoring and review of their impact by government, to:

a. Clarify the criteria for child care leave to cover leave to take care of infants in the first year of life, increasing this to 18 months where illness or disability require it and, in later measures, providing longer leave periods for both parents to encourage uptake of joint parental leave.

b. Take over the payment by government of social security contributions while workers are on parental leave, to make this less dependent on individual workplace cultures.

c. Progressively extend eligibility for parental leave entitlements to all categories of workers, balancing employer and worker interests by providing for a window of 12 months before short term workers can claim these entitlements.

d. Progressively increase the share of the wage paid for parental leave, and consolidating from 2010 onwards basic child care leave benefits and work resumption benefits after child care leave into the "child care leave benefits," with the full amount paid during the leave (MHLW, 2010).

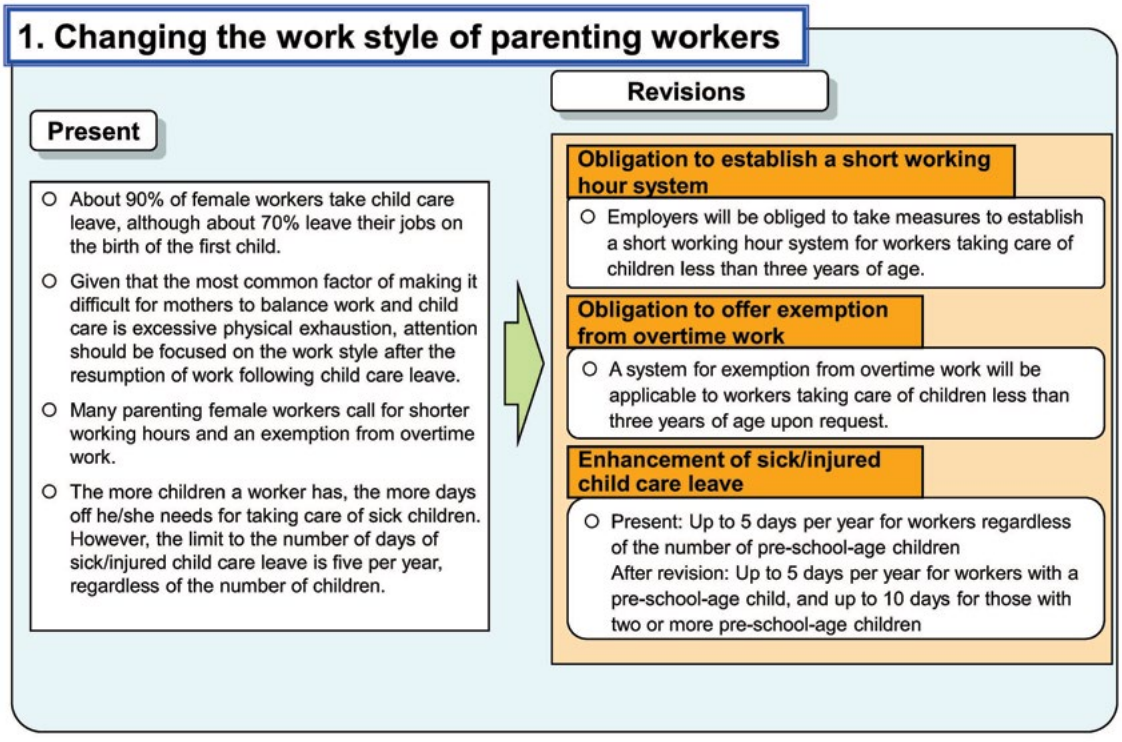
The barriers to male worker uptake of parental leave and roles raised in research, media and social dialogue also informed negotiations involving government, employers and labour on incentives to encourage a change in norms and practice. The 2001 law reforms prohibited discriminating against women applying for or taking parental leave. In the second stage in 2002, the reforms set limitations on overtime work and raised the eligible age of children whose parents could take shorter working hours.

In the third stage in 2005, law reforms expanded the eligibility of workers for child or family care leave, extended the child care leave period, eased the limit on the number of leaves taken and established the sick/injured child care leave system (MHLW, 2010). If fathers took the leave, it was extended by a further two months until the child is 14 months old.

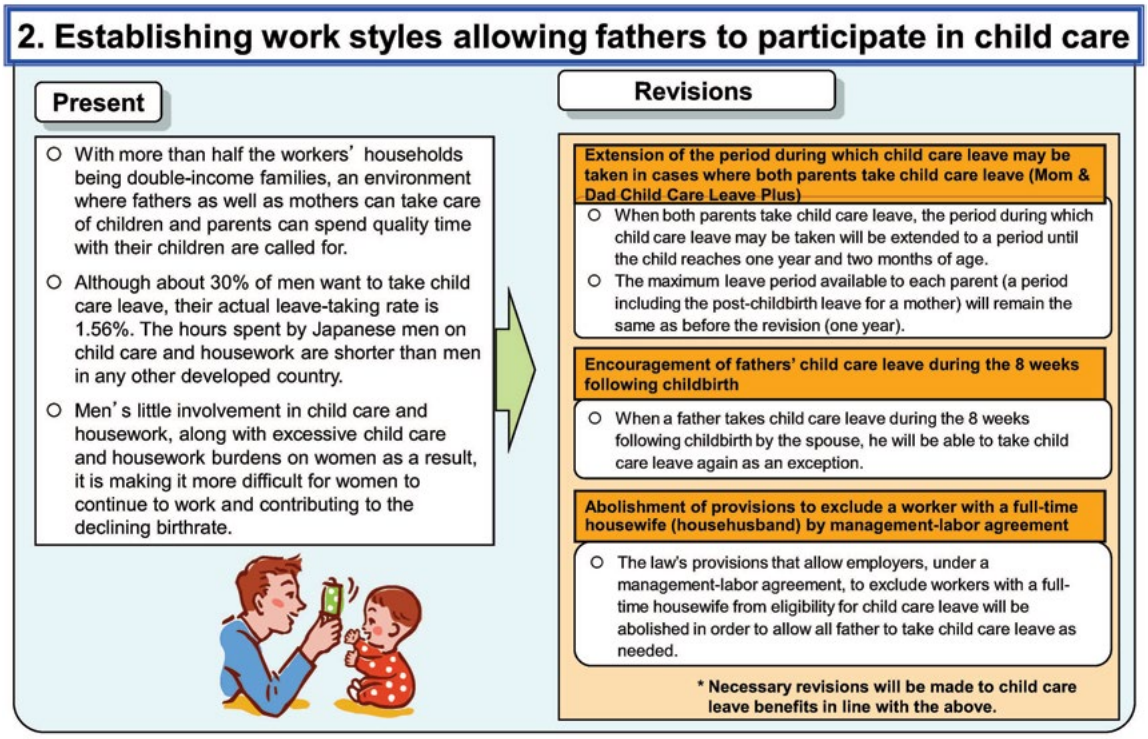
When uptake still remained poor, after election of Prime Minister Abe as leader of the LDP in 2012, the Abe government increased the leave allowance in 2014 from 50% to 67% of the recipient's pre-child birth monthly standard income, paid out of employment insurance funds for the first 6 months of child care. This had a real impact on mothers and fathers, with the Basic Survey of Gender Equality in Employment Management of private enterprise with more than five employees showing the share of fathers taking child care leave rising from 1.23% in 2008 to 2.6% in 2015 and 3.16% in 2016 (Nagase, 2018).

These policy revisions were implemented in stages, accompanied by information on their aims, scope and changes achieved, as shown graphically overleaf. The 2001 Revision of the *Act on the Welfare of Workers Who Take Care of Children or Other Family Members Including Child Care and Family Care Leave* was implemented in stages, to test policies as they were applied. The MHLW and individual municipalities were responsible for implementation of these policies, and a monitoring system was put in place with a comprehensive measurement methodology that tracked specific indicators consistently over time. The Ministry published an annual report tracking these indicators, rating progress as weak, fair and good, analysing their association with overall demographic trends, and monitoring initiatives such as daycare centres' availability and quality (MHLW, 2010). Ministries monitored operational outputs, tracked the level of policy implementation and reviewed progress in their committees.

While there was limited independent implementation research to evaluate policy approaches, the monitoring of the impact of WLB reforms by the state introduced a level of evidence based policy making, with review of indicators such as working hours, vacation time, the number of women in managerial positions, male uptake of paternity leave, male participation in housework and childcare, employment status of married, pregnant women and those after childbirth, and company promotion of WLB.

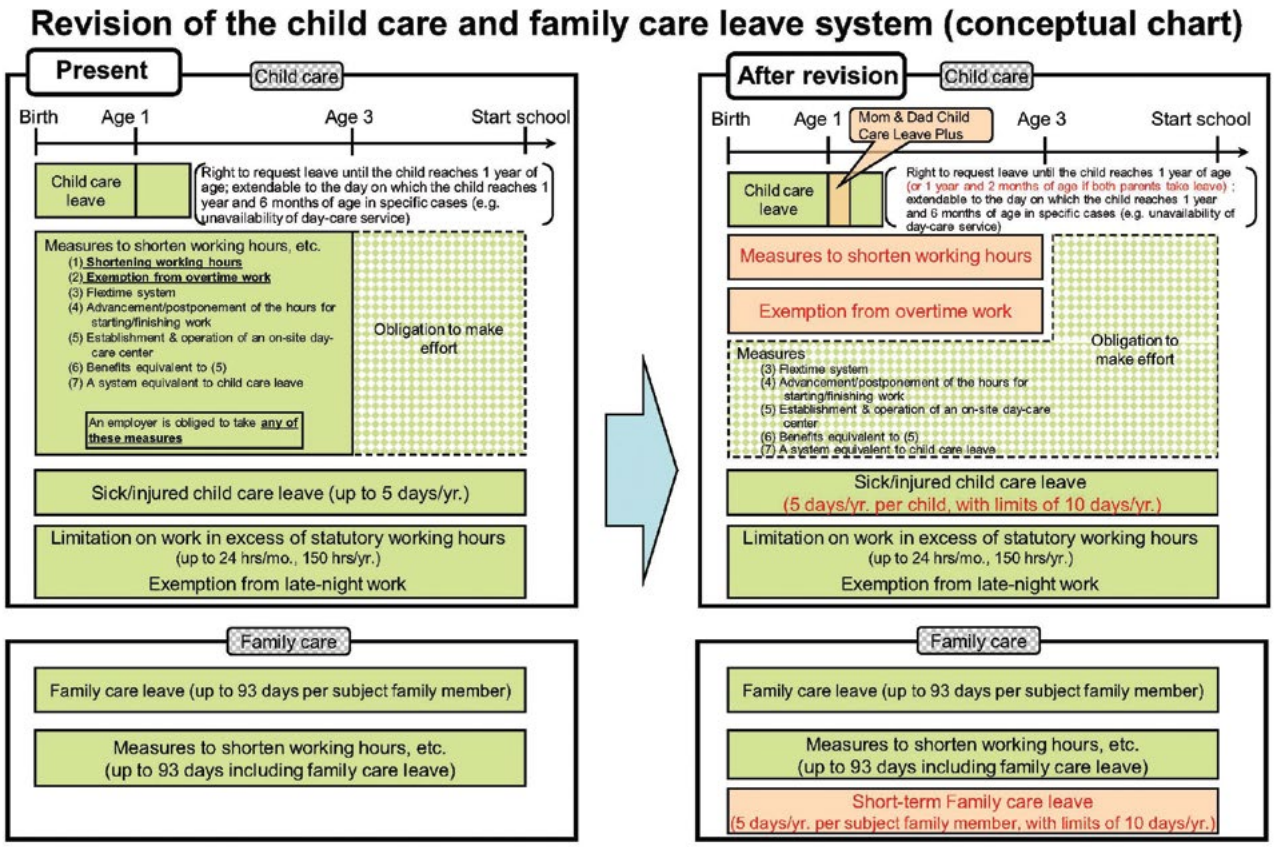


Source: Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2010:23-25



Source: Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2010:23-25

The policy changes made in working hours and parental leave are summarised in the graphic below:



Source: Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2010:26

The application of the reforms to workplace and leave entitlements made it evident that child care services also needed to expand. Yet municipalities faced resource challenges in expanding facilities, complaining of high running costs (Centre for Public Impact, 2017). One response in 2005 law was to give parents 6 months further leave if the mother could not go back to work due to a lack of accredited child care facilities (Nagase, 2018). The policy dialogue thus turned to measures to boost the number of daycare centres and the enrollment of children (Centre for Public Impact, 2017). In 2012, Japan passed a law making it easier for small-scale nurseries to operate. When implementation of the law commenced in 2015, overnight, 1,655 existing small-scale nurseries were accredited and the subsidies they were given enabled them to lower their tuition fees, immediately increasing by 7% the number of authorized nurseries in Japan (Sugeno, 2017). This was only a first step, and various measures were identified as necessary for both the quantitative expansion and the qualitative improvement of early childhood school education, childcare and child-rearing support services in communities.

To support these initiatives, Cabinet implemented its own research on social trends and attitudes, with research also at the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research on how other high-income countries addressed these issues (Fukuda, 2017). In 2015, Cabinet set up a new organization called Children and Childrearing Administration in the Cabinet Office, with a Minister of State for Special Missions. A National Council for Promoting the Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens was set up in 2015, chaired by the Prime Minister to discuss the policy options and policy proposals were framed by this council and by Cabinet (Govt of Japan, 2018).

The policy options emerging from these processes combined kindergartens and nursery centers in 'early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres' and expanded the provision of ECEC centres to reduce the number of wait-listed children. Measures were also discussed to improve the quality of ECEC and child-rearing support, with particular attention to areas where the number of children was reported to be declining. Local governments had begun in 2009 to initiate community schemes to support families with young children through home visiting by volunteers, modelled on the United Kingdom's *Home Start* system, while also considering how to make transport, commercial and other facilities more family and child friendly (Govt of Japan, 2018).

The 2012 *Child and Childcare Support Act* consolidated the legal framework for these measures, combined in a *Comprehensive Support System for Children and Child-rearing*, with implementation commencing in 2015 (MECSST and MHLW, 2012). Projects were created to support owners of company-site daycare facilities and in 2017 plans were set up to provide by 2020 enough childcare facilities for about 320 000 children, to prepare for an 80% employment rate in women (Govt of Japan, 2018).

Government also drew on and shared positive experiences from particular companies. For example, MS Manufacturing Co., Ltd., a mold manufacturer for automotive parts in Kiyosu City, introduced a child-companion attendance system from 2017 on the advice of female employees. In this system the company provides a safe "children's room" in the workplace where employees can bring children to the workplace and have time with them during the working day (Govt of Japan, 2018).

While these measures combined addressed many dimensions of the WLB, some family-related polices still sustained old gendered work and family norms and patterns, such as the 1980 support for statutory share inheritances, the 1984 special tax reductions for part-time earners, the 1985 guarantee of basic pension for housewives and special income tax deductions for spouses (Takahashi et al., 2014). Their persistence indicates that the policy reform process is still ongoing.

Over fifteen years, policy dialogue and law reform were thus used to progressively expand family friendly workplace policies and child care services. The changes drew on evidence in government-led mechanisms for policy dialogue, negotiation and review to inform and encourage step-wise policy design and reform. The next section shows how this and the profile built for WLB connected with high level political support, to facilitate adoption of this stepwise reform.

4.3 Political and decision maker support for the changes

The LDP of Japan is a centre-ground political party that has almost continuously been in power since its foundation in 1955, except for a period between 1993 and 1994 and again from 2009 to 2012, when coalitions of smaller parties formed the government. It is a coalition in the centre ground, combining conservative economic policies with welfare approaches in social policy, including on families and children. The LDP has traditionally identified itself with support for rapid, export-based economic growth and an intention to streamline government bureaucracy. From the 1990s it has pursued a vision of Japan as of a high-technology information society, promoting scientific research and domestic demand.

This stability of the political system and its orientation gave large corporations influence in the way the WLB was responded to before the 1990s. For example, when the LDP was considering improved legal provisions on childcare leave in 1980, the four largest business groups in the country, the Japanese Federation of Employer Associations (Nikkeiren), the Japanese Chamber of Commerce, the Japan Committee for Economic Development and the Federation of Economic Organizations submitted a statement to the Diet opposing this, arguing it would place a burden on firms and that a single standard should not be applied. The LDP abandoned the policy change and voted down all subsequent legislation by the opposition party in the 1980s (Lambert, 2007). As noted earlier, the business community advocated for reduced public spending on childcare and service subsidies during a time of economic recession. Their views dominated over the many opinion papers, postcards and joint petitions submitted by childcare and local parent groups to the Diet as temporary cuts to childcare were passed (Lambert, 2007).

Nevertheless, the '1.57 shock' in 1989 of the lowest birthrate in recorded history and the demographic trends also raised political concern, with various political responses in the 1990s on fertility. In 1990 the government established an inter-ministry liaison committee in the Cabinet called *Creating a Sound Environment for Bearing and Rearing Children* to debate family policy measures. The political leadership adopted and communicated a strong pro-natal position in a 1991 government guideline, *Towards Satisfactory Conditions for Healthy Child Rearing* and made consequent reforms to the 1995 Childcare and Family Leave Act, taking them forward through the technical committees as noted earlier (Centre for Public Impact, 2017).

The research evidence and media outlined in an earlier section drew political attention to the wider disconnect between economic and social policy, and between corporate culture and the aspirations and practices of working people and women.

For the LDP this became an electoral issue, as part of and added to the rising political concern over the economic and social consequences of an ageing population and a need to revive economic growth (Lambert, 2007). In parliamentary debates, opposition parties and women raised social and WLB issues. In 1989, 22 female lawmakers won seats in the Upper House of the Diet, (termed the 'Madonna whirlwind!), and Takako Doi became the first female leader of a major party, the Japan Socialist Party. There is some report that this also added pressure for political support for gender related issues, including on domestic violence against women, albeit not specifically on these WLB reforms (Ito, 2019).

The Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, took leadership of the political response, giving policy direction and working with key groups of parliamentarians in the LDP and the Diet to widen reforms in the 2000s towards more comprehensive approaches. Women's active participation in Japanese society and in the economy were promoted as a key dimension of a wider politically-led campaign in the 2000s for an economic revitalization strategy, termed *Abenomics*. The first lady was also an advocate of this focus on women, while the evidence and reports from the processes described earlier and in various expert meetings added support to the link between WLB and economic revitalization.

The measures intensified and became more comprehensive after 2010 with the adoption of a policy strategy termed *Womenomics*, discussed in a Cabinet office committee and adopting proposals from Kathy Matsui, then Japan strategist for global investment bank Goldman Sachs.

Womanomics argued that greater participation by women in the workforce, especially in leadership roles, could improve Japan's GDP and fertility rates. It proposed increasing women in leadership positions, strengthening childcare provision, encouraging men to take more active roles in parenting and reducing working hours (Nagase, 2018). It also proposed workplace organization changes that could enable womens' work, such as teleworking and flexible hours, and fairer ways of evaluating and compensating for work inputs. The various policy measures that followed have been described in the earlier subsection, while noting that the full spectrum of changes are still in progress.

While these changes had high-level support in the LDP and thus government policy attention, they still had to win over political support from influential Japanese companies. One way this was done was by positioning womanomics as an economic rather than a social strategy, labelling the policies as economic investments rather than costs and as vital to address the labour demands of the economy.

A 2 trillion yen package of public financing (US$17.5 billion) used to invest in childcare services and leave benefits was, for example, labelled by Prime Minister Abe in 2012 as a revolution *in productivity and human resource development,* linked to wider policy options such as free university education for students in low-income households (Nikkei Asian Review, 2017). A *Conceptual meeting for an era of 100-year life expectancy* in 2017 discussed a grand design for policies to establish an economic and social system in an anticipation of an era of a 100-year life expectancy and technological change, with investment in children a means to meet the skills and capacity demands for future production systems (Govt. of Japan, 2018).

Beyond the LDP's broader liberalization and tax incentives for companies, government applied incentives to build corporate support for WLB policies, including award of a government certification (*Kurumin*) mark on products of firms with high WLB awareness and child care measures (Nagase, 2018; Smith, 2017).

Male 'pathbreakers', while more the exception than the rule, played a role at different levels and departments of companies, adjusting their work patterns and visibility reprioritizing work to spend time with families and in childcare, stating that *we have this policy, so we should use it* (Takahashi et al, 2015: 114). As social mindsets shifted and to further consolidate such changes, relevant duties that were voluntary became mandatory, such as the shift in 2014 requiring company disclosure of key aspects of women's participation as mandatory.

Having more women in management was also seen to build corporate support. Prime Minister Abe personally encouraged listed firms to appoint at least one woman to their boards and by 2015 all listed firms were required to disclose how many female board members they had. The 2015 *Act Concerning Promotion of Women's Career Activities* further nudged enterprises to promote women through voluntary action plans, with firms with good performance recognized through certified government marks (*Eruboshi*) on their products and preference in public procurements (Nagase, 2018).

The trade unions and civil society were brought through the jointly negotiated worklife charter noted earlier, but also had their own influence. Long working hours and its relationship to suicide had become electoral issues that could not be ignored by politicians and labor unions and parents associations intervened on WLB practices, such as municipal accredited day care (Nagase, 2018).

5. Summary of and learning on key drivers of the policy change

5.1 Summary of key drivers and processes fostering policy change

The demographic shock of the lowest birthrate in recorded history in 1989 and concern over fertility and ageing opened a window of opportunity in Japan to understand the causes, merging two policy issues: supporting working women, with implied issues of gender norms and workplace cultures, and addressing the implications of the demographic changes for sustained economic revival and growth. The case study describes how an analysis of the causes of low fertility led over two decades to a range of policy changes related to the WLB, including reforms on child care and other services for families and children, parental leave, working hours, male roles in child care, flexible working conditions for workers with children and ongoing reforms to the social security and tax system.

In a context of weak civil society and union voice, a negative view of social activism, a conservative political leadership and strong business influence, a significant body of WLB research provided a credible vehicle to give voice to the concerns of working women and families. It opened debate on problematic norms and workplace cultures and strengthened a policy discourse on the WLB. While there was some critique over the greater attention given in these studies to fertility than to gender norms and over the bias towards large workplaces, given the political concerns on fertility and the policy influence of larger firms, these links may have been important to draw policy attention, especially where reinforced by media stories and social debate.

The response was a process of policy development and law reform that, while involving a range of stakeholders in various committees and including wider evidence and international experience, was largely informed by evidence and analysis generated by Japanese state actors. In fact, the investment in key universities for the capacities needed for this and a view of state employment as desirable by high-skilled graduates pointed to the longstanding intentional nature of this approach to policy development. Policy reforms were implemented in stages, with incentives and dialogue to support their uptake and monitoring of their delivery and, to some extent, their impact.

The long period of LDP governments and the party's conservative orientation gave large corporations averse to state constraints on their business practice historical influence in policy decisions. WLB became a stronger electoral issue, however, partly as a result of the accumulating evidence from research, social and media dialogue on gender and workplace norms and indeed from the work by state officials. Collectively, they pointed to a disconnect between economic and social policy and between corporate culture and the aspirations and practices of working people and women, and showed a connection between this and Japan's demographic challenges. The political contestation around the WLB also increased as women became more involved in opposition parties and raised the issues in parliamentary debate, with a coalition of opposition parties winning power from LDP in 2009-2012.

From 2010, the LDP leader and later Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, took leadership of and intensified the political response, giving policy direction and widening the reforms, as part of his economic revitalization strategy, Abenomics. The inclusion of Womanomics within this raised WLB reforms as an *economic* rather than a social strategy, labelling them as economic *investments* rather than costs and as vital to address the labour demands of the economy.

This economic framing was key to trigger business support and significant public financing, backed by various incentives to encourage uptake of the workplace reforms.

The change in gender norms and roles has been more difficult to achieve. Japanese men still spend the lowest number of hours per day in household chores (1.23 hours) of high-income countries and women are reported to be reluctant to negotiate changes in domestic roles with men who work long hours (Ito, 2019;Takahashi et al., 2015). While female employment has risen and child care support has improved, women continue to dominate in irregular and lower income jobs and unpaid domestic work (Fujisaki and Ohinata, 2010; Takahashi et al., 2014).

Campaigns such as Ikumen revisioned male stereotypes; male 'pathbreakers' have visibly changed work styles to choose family time and some firms are showing a proactive shift to a family-friendly firm culture (Takahashi et al., 2015). Social attitudes may be changing as a result of the concrete changes achieved to date, but changes to deeply rooted gender norms are slow, potentially intergenerational, and may rely on further changes to address gaps between WLB as policy and its practice. This is acknowledged, including in political discourse, with an articulated need to go further in promoting women to managerial positions, in closing the wage gap between men and women and between permanent and temporary employees, in improving the career paths and skills development of new entrants and re-entrants to the labour market and in other family-related policies (Nagase, 2018; Takahashi et al., 2014).

5.2 Learning and insights on the facilitators of policy change

The documented and verbal reflections of those involved in the policy changes on WLB in Japan point to further learning and insights from the experience on policy change. These are shared, while noting the unique features of Japan's social, political, institutional and workplace cultures.

In raising and keeping the issue on the policy and political agenda, tackling an issue requires many 'angles of entry'. While early processes may have focused on workplace practices and early child care, the appreciation of investment in children as bringing both social and an economic returns to families and the country and the understanding of how deeply rooted are the gender norms affecting the WLB means that attention is now shifting to ensuring free access to high school, targeting people earlier in life both in terms of the norms and capacities they bring to the wider economic and social policies. Social concepts and norms are also more easily taken up when embedded in social culture and with commodities to support uptake, such as for fathers to easily participate in childcare.

In the development and adoption of policy options, it is necessary to think about the sequencing of change. For example, after adoption of the core features of the WLB concept, work is continuing on the wider application across different groups of workers – full/part time- including through other policy areas such as taxation and in the slower process of reform of gender norms. As is common in East Asian policy, the technical input and policy processes are framed as collective rather than individual, with a collective of influential technical state officials providing input, reading and responding to political directions, providing a stability in dealing with the longer-term changes needed.

In building political and public support and sustaining policy implementation, it was effective to use the economy as a driver, to get support from key actors, and to focus on issues and approaches where there was greater chance of support, such as in the linking between fertility and the economy. This enabled changes to be achieved that could act as a pathway for more difficult issues, like changing gender and social norms. The strong leadership of the prime minister was important. The change is a process, and the measures for it need to be envisaged as such, with a communication strategy and measures to engage and convince key actors on the pathway for the change, and as social consensus builds and norms change, to move from voluntary to compulsory approaches to consolidate the change.

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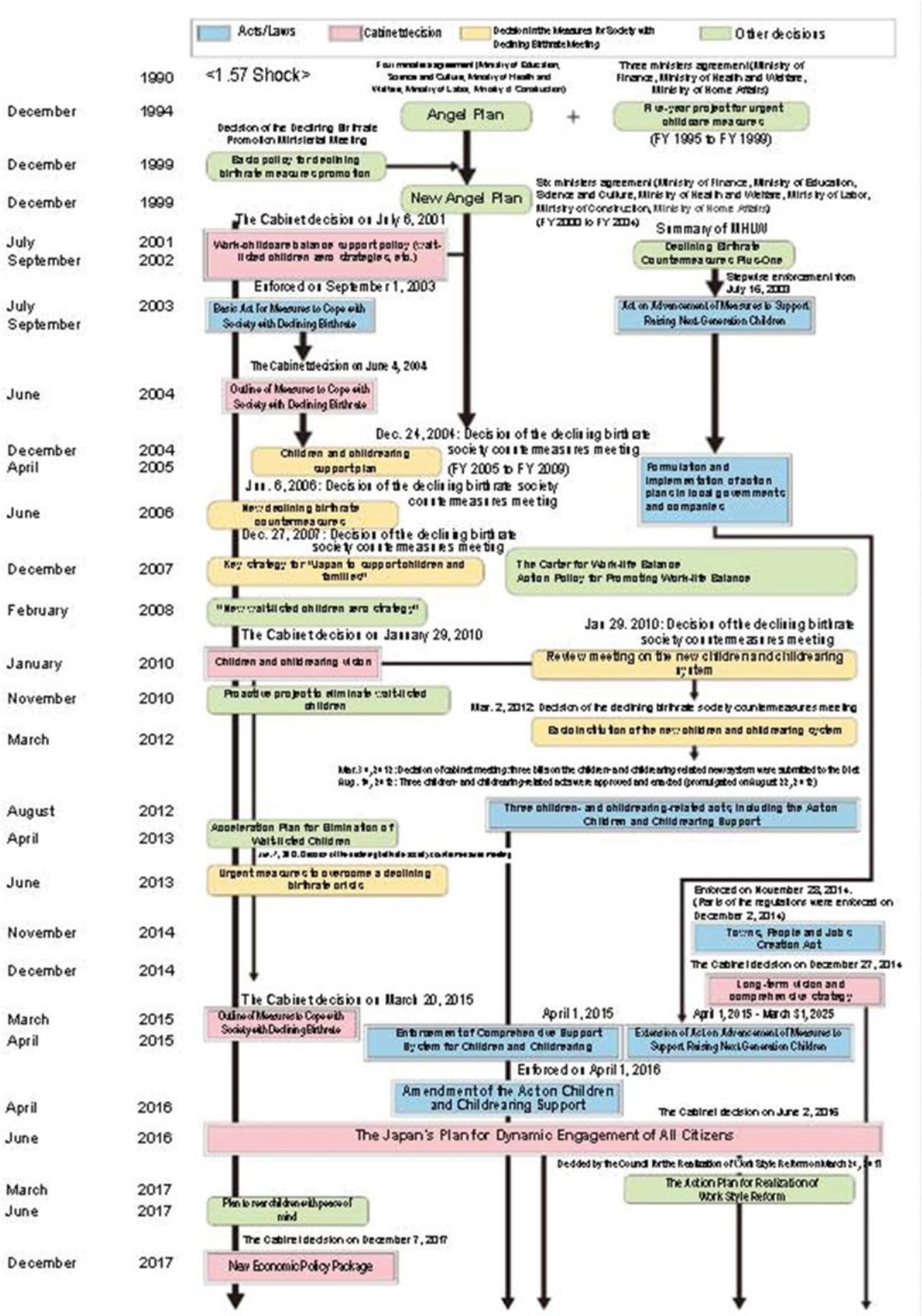
Annex: Chronological history of activities



Source: From 'A 2018 declining birthrate white paper (summary)' Cabinet office in Govt of Japan, 2018:38

Endnotes

1 Acknowledgement: With thanks to Hon Yasuhisha Shiozaki, Dr Kenji Takehara and Dr Tsuguhiko Kato for key informant input integrated into the text and to Hon Shiozaki for review of the draft. All graphics under creative commons/open license or used with permission.

2 See Loewenson and Masotya (2018) for information on the conceptual and analytic framework used.