Inquiring into Work/Life
Issues in Corporations

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I would like to take this opportunity to contribute to The Asia Taiheiyō Tōkyū by offering some background to my most recent research: the study of "work/life" policy implementation a U.S. multinational corporation in Tokyo. "What is an anthropologist doing studying corporate personnel policy?" one might ask. The answer is three-fold: first, as a scholar of contemporary Japanese society, and in particular gender and the economy, I have long been interested in issues concerning gender and employment Japan. Second, researching work/life policy goes to the heart of several key issues in contemporary post-modern societies, such as the meaning of and value people assign to work, family, leisure, and other pursuits. Third, these policies originated in the U.S. and are being tested for adoption in Japan. Hence, I expect the reception and utilization of these policies by employees in Japan to differ somewhat from the ways they have been received and utilized in the U.S., and these differences should tell us something about local cultural and institutional influences in policy implementation. It will also relate to us one local response to a global discourse of the meaning of gender equality, thereby tracing the connectors linking gender, modernity and globalization in Asia's leading economic nation. Before I get ahead of myself, let me give some background on work/life policy in the U.S.

Background, I: Work/Life Policy in the U.S.

In the past two decades, the United States has seen increasing variegation and complexity in family patterns. While U.S. culture was never fully represented by the breadwinner father, the homemaker mother and two children, it is ever less so (Coontz, 1993). Perhaps more importantly, we have seen a paradigmatic shift in which we recognize the legitimacy of women's role in the workplace throughout their lifecourse, regardless of marital status.

As we move away from the gendered male breadwinner/female homemaker division of labor,

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we encounter an increasing number of parents of both genders in the workplace who have sole or shared responsibilities for dependents, be they children, disabled family members, or elderly family members. Indeed, the labor force participation rate of married women with children under the age of six climbed from 18.6% in 1960 to 30.3% in 1970 and 63.5% in 1995 (Blau, 1998: 117). Recognition of the difficulties workers have in dealing with life-course related events, be they maternity and childbirth or care for infirm dependents, led the U.S. government to pass the Family Medical Leave Leave Act in 1993 (Blau, 1996; Ruhm and Teague, 1997).

It is not only the public sector that has recognized this dilemma and moved to address it. Corporations, too, have come to realize that workers who cannot achieve balance between their work and their lives exhibit problems of absenteeism and lowered productivity. In response to this, some corporations have created policies to give employees more discretion over their work schedules, to allow them more flexibility in managing their work and their lives. Known as "work/family friendly policies" or "work/life policies," they constitute a range of strategies that incorporate flexibility. Among them are reduced hours for full-time workers, telecommuting, flex-time, compressed work-week, family leave and job-sharing. Research in U.S. corporations with work/life policies has shown employees' use of such policies leads to more satisfied, more productive and more dedicated workers. Such policies improve worker retention, and also act as a way to attract recruits to the firm (Rapoport, Bailyn, Kolb and Fletcher, 1998, Bailyn, Fletcher and Kolb, 1997).

While work/life policies may sound like a panacea for worker's problems in the postmodern age, researchers have found many difficulies at the implementation stages. Prime among them are informal, unspoken "rules" of work culture that see as slacking anything less than 100% effort, made visible by one's presence at the company (what Perlow [1997] refers to as "face-time"). When employees make use of flexible work arrangements they may be taken off the promotion track, and indeed their jobs themselves may be endangered (Perlow, 1997). Hence, workers are reluctant to make use of the policies, lest they be branded as disloyal for lacking commitment to the firm. Managers, for their part, hesitate to grant use of the policies for a variety of reasons. Among them are disbelief that such policies could really improve productivity, fear of being seen as a patron, fear of loss of control, and anxiety over headcounts (Bailyn, 1993, Perlow, 1997).

Although work/life policies have met with some resistance in implementation and have not always been successful, researchers of the workplace see an increasing need for their careful implementation in the future in order to meet the challenges of our changing lifestyles and business practices (Bailyn, 1993, Rapaport and Bailyn, 1996).

Background, Ⅱ: Work/Life Policies in Japan

Unlike U.S. workplaces, Japanese workplaces have not undergone either the revolution in the

gender role paradigm or the variegation in family patterns discussed above. Although women have steadily increased their labor force participation in the past four decades, and while it has become commonplace for married Japanese women to re-enter the workforce after their children are of school age, their re-entry is usually restricted to part-time work. Their labor-force participation curve traces the shape of an "M", wherein the rate of employment peaks between the ages of 20–24, declines between the ages of 24 and 34, before rising to a second peak between ages 45–49, when it again descends (Rōdōshō, 1997). Over the decade the "M" curve has increasingly flattened out as women push back the age of first marriage and the age of quitting their first stable employment,with some women remaining on the job after marriage and through childbearing, but these changes have not been enough to erase the "M". Employers allot the stable "regular" jobs to men, the "corporate warriors" and from them they expect total commitment, expressed in long hours of work and loyalty to the firm. Women, because they are viewed by employers as ephemeral and peripheral employees, are not generally expected nor encouraged to remain in the workplace for the span of their careers. Rather, they take on the entire responsibility for managing the home, their children's educations, and the health of their families (Lock, 1996; Osawa, 1994; Roberts, 1994, 1996). In fact, Japan is the only post-industrial nation where we see no correlation between higher educational status and attachment to work for womem: holding a college degree does not necessarily mean commitment to a career (Brinton, 1993, Tsuya and Mason, 1992).

While Japan's Equal Opportunity in Employment Law (EEOL) of 1986 made some headway in putting on the policy table the concerns of women who desired more gender equality in the workplace, it suffered from weak enforcement mechanisms as well as a lack of cultural consensus. What the EEOL created in many firms was a so-called dual-track employment scheme, whereby firms a select few women to join new male recruits in career-track positions, while slotting the vast majority of new women recruits into office-track positions (Lam, 1992; Wakisaka, 1997).

Allowing women to become female corporate warriors did nothing to change the baseline standard of the "regular employee" job, which requires the counterpart of a "professional housewife" to make family life possible. Because of the incompatibility of career and home life in Japan, many Japanese women prefer to put more emphasis on their roles as mothers, homemakers, and community activists, in which they have considerable authority and for which they garner a strong measure of cultural respect (Lebra, 1984 ; Iwao, 1993; LeBlanc, 1999).

This work environment is significantly different from that of the United States. Why would a corporation seek to implement work/family policies here, and what factors would help or impede their implementation? Three major factors provide impetus for firms to implement work/life policies:

First, the Japanese population dynamic is itself shifting dramatically. This has been caused, on the one hand, by increasingly later ages at first marriage with accompanying decreases in the birthrate, and longer life spans. Government officials, scholars and media have identified the trend to later marriage as being due to women's resistance to the duties that ensue from the marriage contract (Kōseishō, 1998). In other words, young women feel they have more to lose than to gain by marrying, so they delay marriage. This, in turn, lowers the total fertility rate. According to the National Institute of Population and Social Science Reseatch, in 2015, one in four Japanese will be age 65 or over, and in 2049, this will be one in three (Nikkei Weekly 1/27/97).

The specter of an aging population that resembles an inverted pyramid has led Japan's governmental ministries to scramble to put together a variety of policies, known together the Angel Plan, to encourage a more "child-friendly" society that is also a "gender equal" society. They aim to encourage couples to have more children, as well as to share the responsibility of labor force participation as the population declines and a labor shortage becomes evident. The government foresees a time in the not so distant future when women will join their spouses as the mainstays of the labor force. They are developing and implementing a panoply of programs to encourage women's participation in the workforce, while simultaneously urging men to become active in sharing home management and child rearing (Koseisho, 1998, Roberts, unpublished paper). Japan has also strengthened the EEOL, effective April 1999; and in 1995 passed a law allowing one parent up to one year of leave after a child's birth with guarantee of a job for the employee upon return to work. Furthermore, in anticipation of workers' increased needs to care for infirm family members in an era when few peple will have spouses or siblings who can dedicate themselves full-time to this duty, from April 1999 the Childcare Leave Law of 1995 will be re-named the Child-care Leave/Family-care Leave Law[1]. This change allows workers to take a maximum of three months' leave of absence to care for an ill or disabled family member (Rōdōshō, 1997). Recent research indicates that contrary to previous generations wherein it was almost exclusively women who cared for infirm elderly dependents, now men, including middle-aged employees, are increasingly assuming this role (Long and Harris, forthcoming).

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1 Literally, the *Ikuji Kyūgyō, Kaigo Kyūgyō nado Ikuji mata wa Kazoku Kaigo o Okonau Rōdōsha no Fukushi ni kansuru Hōritsu"* (The Law Related to the Social Welfare of Workers who Undertake Care-giving for Family Members or for Infants; Child-Care Leave, Care-taking Leave, etc.).

2 In the postwar period, the Japanese government has a solid track record of establishing and supporting high quality daycare centers for working mothers. Until fairly recently, however, the impetus behind the centers was to provide care for children whose mothers were either unable to care for them, whether for health or economic reasons (i.e., the mother's income was needed to support the family). Nowadays, the rationale has changed as professional women in increasing numbers utilize the centers. Japanese families thus have a strong tendency to look to the State for solutions to daycare problems (Interview with Kanuma Kin, of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, July 1998). See also Eyal Ben Ari, *Body Projects in Japanese Daycare.* London: Curzon Press, 1997.

These policies are certainly out of keeping with the corporate warrior/professional housewife paradigm of 20th century Japan[2]. The national government is pushing more liberal policies toward gender equality than have ever been in place, out of urgency born of the coming labor shortage of the 21st century. The impetus for work/life policies in the U.S. and Japan is rather different, but the need for such policies is evident in both countries.

Second, while most Japanese firms have not viewed their female employees for their long-term potential, Japanese women perceive foreign based firms as the exception, and women desirous of careers often seek out foreign multinationals as employers (Ogasawara, 1998). Such firms, having hired women in career positions and having trained them as well, have a vested interest in assuring their attachment to the firm. In a culture where women are considered to be the primary managers of the household, firms who want workers to remain have every reason to provide them with the tools to help them in their work /life balance.

Third, there are some indications that workers in Japan are beginning to desire more than a single-rail career. According to a vice-president of human resources at one multinational where I interviewed, increasing numbers of college graduates and MBAs are interested in having more time in their lives for self-development, family or community activities. "Life-long Edecation" is being promoted by the Ministry of Education, and several major umiversities have recently opened up spaces for non-traditional students. Work/life policies in Japan may thus appeal not only to couples with children or elderly dependents, but also to those who espouse a different lifestyle than the model of previous generations.

To my knowledge, this will be the first study to investigate the implementation of work/life policies at American multinational Japan. As such, it will shed light on the peculiar problems of implementation in a cultural setting quite different from that where the policies originated. The central questions of this research will be: In Japan, how do employees and managers envision the role of the corporation in work/life issues-would they like the corporation to become active in this area, or would they prefer to let the government and the family be the loci for action? How do employees and managers view their roles as workers and as people, and do they see work/life policies as beneficial in helping them to accommodate work and lifestyle? Where are the trouble spots in implementation and how can these be resolved? What are employees' views on gender roles and parenting/dependent care task allocation, and do work/life policies "fit" these views?

I expect this study to make a significant contribution to three literatures: that of the anthropology of work in post-modern societies, the anthropology of public policy, and literature on human resources management in multinational corporations. At this important juncture where the gender paradigm of the post-war period is being challenged on many fronts, and women are

beginning to join men as mainstays of the labor force, this research will broaden our understanding of how social actors in Japan perceive their options and make work/life choices in the framework of evolving policy initiatives. Policy-oriented approaches are an innovative anthropological "avenue" for studying the localization of global processes in the contemporary world (Shore and Wright, 1998). In the global discourse of work/life policy, we seek to understand the local response in this case study of one American multinational in Japan, by tracing policy down to the ethnographic context.

I hope the study will also contribute important comparative data to anthropological research on the changing cultures of family and work, such as those being investigated by the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life, a newly funded Sloan Center for the Study of Working Families at the University of Michigan (Fricke, 1998). If the proposed project could ultimately develop on a similar scale to that of the Michigan Center, thereby facilitating fruitful comparison between America's and Japan's changing work/life cultures, that would be most welcome.

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