



# The Vicious Cycle of the “Male Breadwinner” Model of Livelihood Security

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Three models of livelihood security systems and Japan’s system

Systems to ensure livelihood stability and security have been designed based on assumptions about the “norm” or “typical” gender relations in household chores (that reproduce the labor force) and working styles (that bring income). These norms can be broadly categorized into the following three systems:

- (a) The “male breadwinner” model in which men should be the main earner while their wives should mainly shoulder housework and child raising;
- (b) an assumption that both women and men should balance professional lives with family and community lives;
- (c) systems wherein public policies do not take into consideration reproductive costs of the labor force.

Under the family norm of model (a), men are entitled to stable employment and “family wage” that provides livelihood security to include their families and social security. The labor market is regulated in order to guarantee men in their mid-20s to mid-40s stable employment and family wage. At the same time, in cases where the labor force of the male head of the household fails to be sold, social programs such as health insurance, employment insurance, and

pension are provided in accordance with the risks accompanying the course of their lives to include invalidity, unemployment, and retirement benefits. Women and children are covered only as subsidiaries of the head of the household. Family responsibilities are to be shouldered by full-time wives, and support services such as childcare should only be provided in exceptional cases such as low income or “lack of ability to care for children” (for example, when both parents are self-employed full-time workers or ill, the mother is pregnant or right after giving birth, or the family is suffering from a natural disaster). The typical “male breadwinner” model of livelihood security exists in continental Europe and Japan, countries that are often described as “familialistic.”

As example of the norm of model (b), in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, both women and men are expected to balance their work with family and community lives; that is, both women and men should perform productive work as well as reproductive work (work/life balance model). Women and men are entitled as individuals to social security that corresponds to their work, as well as social services that back-up household responsibilities. Under such a livelihood security system regulations are institutionalized to ensure equal employment opportunities as well as family support such as child benefits, childcare for babies and infants,



services for caring for senior citizens, and parenting leave. Individuals, not households, become the unit to pay taxes and social insurance contributions, tax exemptions for families are moderate, and social support for bereaved families is abolished.

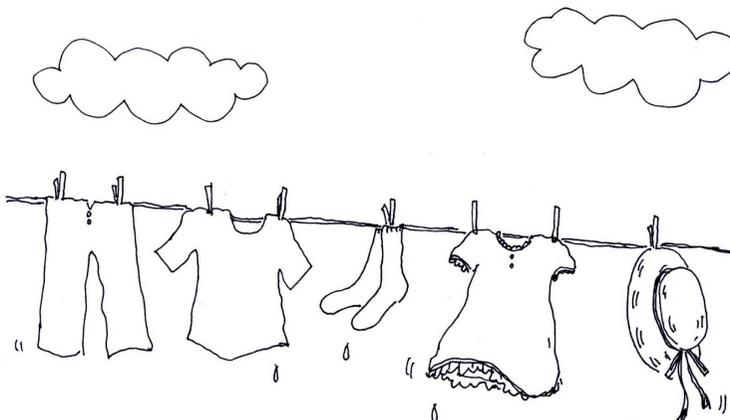
Under model (c), of which the United States is a typical example, public policies to support families are weak and no special social securities are in place in the labor market. We can call this type of system “market-oriented.”

What should be noted is that Japan’s “male breadwinner” model of livelihood security system is not a “traditional” system, but rather one that was introduced during a period of rapid economic growth in the 1960s. In the 1980s, the “male breadwinner” model was strengthened during the era of “Japanese-style welfare society,” when many fields of social policy were reformed.

Although 1985 marked the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and Japan’s ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the general direction of social policy of the country at the time was not promoting gender equality but one that emphasized families – especially women – as those who would shoulder welfare in lieu of

the state. The system that was advantageous for labor and management styles of large corporations was maintained and strengthened. At the same time, in cases where women were required to subsidize household expenses by taking on part-time work (in addition to taking on responsibilities of housework, child raising, and care of husbands and elderly parents) welfare was provided through special tax and pension provisions. Specifically, in 1980, the portion of legal spousal inheritance was increased from one-third to one-half. The maximum spousal exemption amount for income tax calculation was increased repeatedly, in 1984, 1987, 1988 and 1989. Systems for spousal special exemption for income tax calculation and spousal special exemption for gift tax were introduced in 1987 and 1985 respectively. Bereaved family pension was expanded and the system of Category III Insured Person was established in 1985.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these trends, the mid-1980s was a time when the number of double-income households surpassed the number of households with full-time housewives. In the late 1990s, large, well-known corporations went bankrupt all too easily, restructuring and salary decreases became common, and children would grow up to become unstable,





irregular workers [Editor's note: they are called *freetaa* (free in English + *arbeiter* in German) in Japanese], not wanting (or not able) to marry. In addition, since "no-fault divorce"<sup>2</sup> is widely recognized and implemented, wives' positions can no longer be guaranteed as "lifetime reserved seats." The conditions under which "male breadwinner" model can function thus no longer exist.

Nevertheless, transition from the "male breadwinner" model of livelihood security system has not taken place. In 1997, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was amended and strengthened, and the Long-Term Care Insurance Law was enacted. Furthermore, the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society was enacted in 1999. However, the 2004 reform of the pension system was far from complete.

Deadlock of the "male breadwinner" model in the era of post-industrialization

The "male breadwinner" model system has failed, not because of the prolonged recession but rather as a result of failing to appropriately handle the post mid-1980s era of "post-industrialization" – the expansion of service industries and intelligence-based economies. The needs of post-industrial economies and societies are to expand the "flexibility" of the labor market and of families. Despite this, the reaction of the "male breadwinner" system of livelihood security has been to protect employment of men in their mid-20s to mid-40s by narrowing employment opportunities for the young and for women, and by forcing out middle-aged and senior men through early retirement. Therefore, families must continue relying on the income of male breadwinners. As a result, the base that shoulders taxes and social insurance premiums diminishes, the burden

of taxes and premiums per laborer increases, and employers that want to evade social insurance contributions become more and more reluctant to hire full-time laborers. This is indeed a vicious cycle.

Japan's unemployment rate has been on the increase since the mid-1990s and the rate for men is higher than for women. However, looking at differences between gender and age groups, in the age-group between 25 and 54 years old, the unemployment rate for women is higher. The reason the overall average unemployment rate is higher for men is because the rates are high for the young and the old; despite this, the employment rate for the aged is by far the highest among developed countries. The employment performance (i.e., combination of unemployment risk and maintenance of income) for men in their mid-20s to mid-40s to senior men remains high in relative terms compared to women, and to international data.

The increase in real wages for men has slowed since the 1970s, however. Since 1998, amid the decrease in average wages, the decrease in wages for men in their early 50s stands out in particular. At the same time, employment of "irregular" workers such as part-timers and dispatched workers, are increasing before appropriate labor conditions for these workers are put in place. In Japan, at the same time that the proportion of part-time workers is increasing, cases where people are reluctantly engaging in part-time work are increasing. In addition, the wage gap between part-time and full-time workers has also been expanding.

In 2003 the proportion of part-time workers among all employees in Japan was 14.7% for men, which is the third highest internationally after Australia and the Netherlands among OECD countries. For women, the rate is 42.2%, which is again the



third highest after the Netherlands and Australia. According to international comparison of the wage gap between full-time and part-time female workers, when the median hourly wages for full-time workers is set at 100, part-time workers earn 93.1 in the Netherlands, 92.3 in Sweden, 87.5 in Germany (figures above are for 1995), 86.8 in Australia (1997), 74.5 in Britain (2000), while part-time workers earn only 66.4 (2001) in Japan and 62.5 in the United States (1996). While the proportion of part-time employees in Japan is highest after Australia and the Netherlands, in these two countries the wage gap between full-time and part-time workers is small; however, the wage gap in Japan is not only large, but has also expanded.

While the number of regular employees is decreasing and the customary Japanese-style employment practice is changing, the large numbers of irregular workers who are maltreated and lack stability precisely signify the customary employment practice (or more precisely, its flip side). Corporations, while adhering to the customary employment practice, are accelerating the decrease in numbers of regular employees.

Unfortunately, it is not possible for family members to alleviate anxieties surrounding unstable employment and low income. This is because employment opportunities for the young are deteriorating steadily, and while double-income households are increasing, the burdens on men's shoulders have not been vastly lightened. This is because wives are often only engaged in part-time work and their incomes are often held low due to tax and social insurance exemption. Moreover, many corporations only offer jobs with short hours and low wages to women who are in their mid-30s or above.

Making problems even worse are defence mechanisms used by both corporations and families against recession

and employment anxieties. While corporations are cutting down personnel costs through restructuring and irregular use of personnel, families are cutting down household expenses rather than attempting to maintain or increase incomes by increasing the number of earners. While cutting down expenses at the micro level – i.e., both at the corporation and household levels – may be practical defense mechanisms, at the macro level this results in slowing down of the economy of the society as a whole.

Both declining birth rates and an aging society have progressed interactively in a vicious cycle as well. Self-defense mechanisms that seem reasonable for the time being, such as avoiding marriage and bearing children because of the fear of economic burdens and anxieties for the future, result in further decline of birth rates and aging, and thus worsen future outlooks for pension finance and care for senior citizens.

Japan, a country with high suicide rate

For seven years in a row since 1998, the number of annual suicide deaths has been more than 30,000. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Japan's suicide rate in 2000 is the 10th highest out of 99 countries in the world. For women, Japan is third highest after Sri Lanka (figures for 1991) and China (figures for 1999 in specific survey areas). For men, Japan ranks 11th highest after countries such as Sri Lanka and ex-Soviet Eastern European countries.

The suicide rate in Japanese women has not changed very much in the past 50 years and the suicide rate has remained high. Considering that the survey data in Sri Lanka is old and that data for China is not country-wide, the suicide rate for Japanese women is probably the highest in the world.



In terms of age, suicide rate is highest in Sri Lanka for 15 to 24 year old, while in Japan, the rate gets higher with age.

Out of the 11 countries (except Sri Lanka where the data is old) in which the male suicide rate is high, the rate is highest for those over 75 years old in Hungary, Estonia and Slovenia. In contrast, in seven countries including Japan (also Lithuania, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Latvia and Japan), the rate is highest for those between 45 and 64 years of age. According to vital statistics of population from the mid-1960s to about 1980, the suicide rate for Japanese males got higher by age, but from the 1990s to present, the suicide rate for those in their 40s and 50s has soared rapidly.

Conclusion: “male breadwinner” model of livelihood security has failed

It is known that the suicide rate and the unemployment rate curves are parallel. It is clear that recession and employment anxieties underlie the problem and that this directly hits middle-aged and senior men, who should, in principle, have comparatively high employment performance. What has made employment anxieties particularly serious is the fact that as the “male breadwinner”, middle-aged and senior men take upon their shoulders the whole responsibility of feeding wives and children as well as the mortgage. This is indeed a tragic product of the vicious cycle of the “male breadwinner” model of livelihood security.

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Editorial notes:

1. Category III Insured Persons: Refer to the Niwa's article on page 10.

2. No-fault divorce: The divorce is proven without either spouse's fault. When both spouses agree that there is the breakdown of the marriage, they can divorce.

