A Modern Version of 'Breed and Proliferate'? 

Problems in the Bill for Counteracting the Declining Birth Rate

by Yuriko, ASHINO  
(Family Planning Federation of Japan, Inc.)

A Groundswell for Countermeasures

At the Cairo Conference (International Conference on Population and Development) in 1994, reproductive health rights were advocated as fundamental rights of an individual (particularly of a women) and a couple, whereby decisions of sexuality and bearing children are made and controlled by the very people involved and certainly not by the state. In the following year the 4th Women's Conference (Beijing Conference) clearly announced reproductive health rights as the rights of women in the Action Platform.

Following this international trend, the phrase 'reproductive health rights' started appearing in the papers and documents prepared by the government and the Diet. I doubt very much however, that the phrase is understood properly. For example, in 2000, the Gender Equality Advisory Committee, which was involved in making the policies based on The Basic Law of a Gender-equal Society (introduced in 1999) made only an ambiguous statement about reproductive health rights saying "what the 'rights' in reproductive health rights mean must be discussed further as they contain some controversial notions." One cannot but suspect that the government did not want to make it clear that the rights rest with women, because if they did, the consequent implications would be tantamount to verifying women to have fewer children.

At the moment there is almost a roar in Japan calling for a counter measurement against women having not enough children. Such a concern was first reported in the media in 1990 as posing a serious problem for the future of the country, when the average number of children Japanese women bear in life hit a record low of 1.57. In reality the birth rate in Japan started to go below the required maintenance level in late 1970's. The government remained optimistic while Japan was still keeping a relatively high birth rate amongst the developed nations of 1.80. They were also cautious about interfering with population issues, as people still have memories of the "breed and proliferate" slogan during the war.

The 1.57 shock however, changed the government's stance. Together with the ever lowering birth rate, aging of the society has increased rapidly. Faced with a decreasing work force, a slow economy, the breaking down of social welfare system, and a worsening environment, the government turned pessimistic and started plans to encourage and support women to have more children. One such plan is what is called "Angel Plan"(Comprehensive Social Support Plan for Child-Raising 1995-1999), which has continued to date as "New Angel Plan" for 1999-2004. Councils and committees were formed in the national government in the attempt to find a resolution to stop the falling
birth rate. Local governments also have tried to encourage women to have more children by endowing cash for a birth of a new baby.

Despite such efforts of national and local governments, the birth rate continued coming down to 1.34 in 1999, the third lowest after Spain and Italy amongst developed countries. Lawmakers started voicing concerns and introduced a bill to recover birth rate in the Diet. In 2000 some LDP members proposed to delete the 'economic reasons' from the conditions under which an abortion may legally be performed and to toughen the overall conditions for a legal abortion. The coalition government has agreed to raise the income bracket for the child allowance, making it available for a wider population.

These measurements are not directly phrased as 'breed or perish', but they place strong pressure on women to bear a child. Those women who have chosen not to have a child, or who are just not physically able to have a baby will feel stronger pressure. This is exactly the situation which goes against the philosophy of reproductive health rights. We must remember that any form of compulsion, violence, or discrimination ought to be eradicated in the decision process for someone considering whether or not to have a child. Having a child or not must not influence the value of the women either. I will examine the Bill for Counteracting the Declining Birth Rate in the next section.

Problems in the Bill for Counteracting Decreasing Birth Rate

The Bill was originally proposed by the League of Lawmakers Concerned with Declining Infantile Population (in 1999, there were 249 members from both Houses and is headed by Taro Nakayama, an LDP member).

The Law has three chapters including 19 articles. The objectives of the Law are claimed to "ensure the environment for comfortable child-rearing" and to "stop the problem of decreasing number of babies - a grave problem. Japan has never experienced in history." Apart from the fact that this Bill entails interference of the government on the population issue, which is fundamentally wrong, there are serious problems contained in the Bill.

Firstly, Article 6 stipulates that it is a duty of a national to contribute to realizing a society where people can have and bring up children safely and comfortably. Here the duty must not be interpreted to be a duty of bearing a child. Secondly, phrases such as "respect for life" and "dignity of life" are added in Article 9 and 17. I do not object to these, but there is a danger that these phrases may be exploited by some lawmaker to restrict up-to-now-legal abortions. We have seen that these are the very phrases used in the slogans against abortions.

Article 13 proposes more health care for mothers and children, as well as dealing with medical treatment for sterility. This article lacks the perspective of the lifelong health of women claimed by reproductive health rights, but is merely concerned with the aspect of child bearing. We cannot ignore the possibility that such medical technology as prenatal examination could be abused to control not only the quantity but the quality of babies also.

Anti-sterility incidentally, is enforced in many other places than in the Bill under discussion. For instance "Women's Lifelong Health Support Program"(1996-) undertaken by the Ministry of Health and Labor focuses mainly on setting up sterility counseling centers. "New Angel Plan" and "Healthy Family 21"(this is a mother and child health program plan for 2001-2010 and is part of "Healthy Japan 21") also include sterility as an important issue. The current coalition government is looking into the possibility of applying the public medical care system for sterility treatments. If this
was to go ahead, then logically, contraceptive pills, IUD, baby deliveries, and induced abortions must also be entitled for coverage by the public system, but the government is ignoring all the latter.

Policies based on Chapter 2 of the Bill include developing easier work conditions for child raising (such as child raising leave, shortened working hours and job hunting assistance) and better childcare systems and services and financial support. These policies however, must be implemented regardless of the number of children in the country as a holistic child raising support policy, and should not be considered as incentives for having more children.

**Constructing a New Social Paradigm**

Aging and fewer babies are rapidly changing Japanese demographics. Some predict that the total population will start to decrease around year 2007 and by 2050 the population over 65 years of age will constitute one third of the entire population of Japan, about 60% of which will be women. One might say, placing values on the traditional notion of economic progress, that the future is doomed. It would be unlikely that despite all the incentives offered by the government that women will start having more babies. ...We must change our way of thinking and start looking for a new social paradigm where even with low economic growth and less children people can have a happy and comfortable life.

All those social services for child bearing and raising mentioned previously will offer wonderful assistance, but if men do not change along with the new services, there will be no change in social paradigm. A new social paradigm will see men taking child raising leave from work as easily and happily, without covert prejudices, as women. The IT revolution may make it possible for men to work at home looking after children with their wives. Flexi-time working system, making more use of female and aged population in workforce, and accepting more foreign workers will be all part of the new paradigm.

The Bill for Counteracting the declining Birth Rate was rejected this time, mainly because of the objections from women's groups and workers' unions. It is, however, possible that it will be presented to the Diet again in the future. I hope that when it happens, women will voice objection louder, because women should have an intuitive understanding of what reproductive health rights are, as after all, they mean 'I want to make decisions for my own body'.

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