Forging *Ikumen*: On state efforts to redefine masculinity in Japan

Early draft, please do not circulate, post or cite

Mala Htun*
Francesca R. Jensenius†
Melanie Sayuri Sonntag‡

September 2, 2017

Abstract

To curb the falling birth rate and increase women’s labor force participation, the Japanese state has adopted numerous policies and programs to promote greater work-life balance. In recent years, the emphasis has shifted from changing women’s roles to changing men’s roles, identities, and work habits. Among other things, the state has promoted the ideal of the *ikumen* – the active father. Despite these efforts, working hours remain long, few men take parental leave, and there is still a starkly traditional sexual division of labor. In this paper, we draw on survey data and interviews in Japan to analyze the state’s approach to changing male identities and making fatherhood attractive. We show that, parallel to changes in governmental rhetoric, there are some changes in social attitudes, but little change in social practices. Our interview evidence suggests that the barriers to more pervasive behavioral changes lie less (or not exclusively) in the conservative cultural values emphasized by some scholarly literature but largely in a constellation of economic, social, and legal institutions that go against the governmental rhetoric. These findings suggest that the persistence of state-sponsored incentives to behave in ways that reaffirm traditional working styles and gender roles may thwart the achievement of official goals, and point to the need for a more holistic state approach to social change.

*Professor, University of New Mexico. E-mail: malahtun@unm.edu.
†Senior Research Fellow, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. E-mail: fj@nupi.no.
‡PhD student, University of New Mexico. E-mail: msonntag@unm.edu.
1 Introduction

For decades, the Japanese government has worked to increase women’s participation in the paid labor force. Its motivations were largely instrumental: policy makers were alarmed at the country’s declining birth rate and its aging population. Getting more women to work was seen as a way to help support an aging population, and likely also boost the fertility rate.\footnote{Though it seems counterintuitive, studies from advanced democracies show that women’s labor force participation and the fertility rate are positively correlated, especially in contexts where public policies support work-life balance. See, e.g., Rosenbluth (2006) and Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010).}

To increase the supply of women workers, the government extended parental leave, created child care centers, and implored society to help women “shine.” It also worked to adopt equal employment legislation to reduce gender discrimination and expand opportunities for women in the economy.

These policies marked a rhetorical departure from the Japanese post-war economic model of the male breadwinner and “salaryman,” as well as decades of state-supported maternalist ideology which defined women’s public roles and social identities in terms of “thick motherhood” (Lambert, 2007; Roberts, 1994). They also seemed to challenge other long-standing policies and practices in the Japanese economy that discouraged wives and mothers from taking on lifetime careers. Yet after several years, parental leave and child care policies seemed to show little effect. Birth rates remained low, and the labor force participation of Japanese women (especially mothers) lagged OECD averages as mothers continued to leave work after having children. The labor market continued to be stratified by gender: few women rose to leadership ranks, and they were clustered in lower status and lower-paying positions.

Though Japanese feminists had argued for years that women’s advancement depended on changing work styles and men’s roles,\footnote{Interviews with Mari Miura and Masako Ishii-Kuntz, Tokyo, June 2017. See Appendix A for further information about the interviews we are reporting from and a list of respondents.} the government and other sectors of civil soci-
ety largely ignored them, until the 2000s. After the turn of the century, various actors, including men themselves, began to question the model of hegemonic masculinity centered on the salaryman-breadwinner. Especially during the economic recession, men grew less content with the notion that work was the center of their lives, and women’s labor force participation climbed as families attempted to make ends meet, though women’s employment remained largely supplementary to men’s and women worked disproportionately in non-regular employment (part-time or on fixed term contracts) (Ishii-Kuntz, 2002, pp. 199-201). Meanwhile, the government began to promote work-life balance as an economic strategy to increase the competitiveness of Japanese companies (Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen, 2011).

After 2010, the government launched the *ikumen* (イクメン) – or man who is actively involved in parenting – campaign to promote a culture of fatherhood. Then, in 2015, the government began aggressively to promote “workstyle reform” and other programs to change working habits and limit working hours. “Iku-bosses” (イクボス) encourage workers to take paternity leave, more companies have flexible hour programs, some employers turn out the lights at 7 pm, effectively forcing workers to go home, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) awards prizes to companies for their diversity efforts, and so forth.

At the same time, however, there is still a huge gap between the rhetoric and reality of changing gender roles. Working hours remain long, few men take parental leave, and there is still a starkly traditional sexual division of labor. Why isn’t Japanese society filled with *ikumen*?

In this paper, we draw on survey data and interviews to chart the genesis of the *ikumen* phenomenon as part of a broader effort to transform the gender stratification of the Japanese economy and the segregation of social roles. We also analyze the evolution of attitudes and behavior. Looking at JGSS surveys\(^3\) conducted between 2000 and 2012 and a survey of working men from 2014, we show that there have been few changes to behavior when it

\(^3\)Japanese General Social Survey
comes to the sexual division of labor but considerable change to attitudes. Our survey data show that almost half of fathers want to take child care leave, although merely six percent actually take such leave. Similarly, the majority of Japanese society seems to support the *ikumen* ideal: it has become culturally acceptable for men to father in public, such as by wearing babies in carriers and dropping off kids at day care, and most survey respondents agree that men should be able to cook and look after themselves. Yet between 2000 and 2012, we observe virtually no change in the working patterns of men and women.

What are the obstacles to a more widespread diffusion of, and behavioral conformity with, the *ikumen* ideal? Based on interview evidence, we situate the challenges involved with becoming *ikumen* in the context of other incentives and constraints facing families and workers, including the seniority system of public and private organizations, tax rules, the pension system, household registration rules, child allowances and mortgages. Only in 2017 did the government begin to take on the challenge of changing these rules, primarily through a modest proposal to limit working hours. The contradiction between the governmental rhetoric of change and its reluctance to overhaul actual economic and social incentives seem to be an important reason why change is slow. Our findings suggest that the persistence of state-sponsored incentives to behave in ways that reaffirm traditional working styles and gender roles thwart achievement of official goals, and point to the need for a more holistic state approach to social change.

2 Redefining masculinity from the top down

Since 1989, when the fertility rate hit a then-historic low of 1.57 children per woman, the Japanese government began to introduce work-life balance policies to raise the birthrate. Other studies confirm that Japanese attitudes toward gender roles have evolved to be less conservative. One study of voters, for example, found them to be equally, or even more, supportive of women candidates for political office as for men candidates (Kage, Rosenbluth and Tanaka, 2017).
Japanese family policies had been weak to non-existent: it was widely believed that care functions were the primary responsibility of family members, not the state, though many companies offered their married male workers benefits such as child allowances and housing (Fleckenstein and Lee, 2017; Osawa, 1994; Peng, 2002; Toivonen, 2007). In the 1990s the state introduced numerous measures including parental leave, expanded access to child care, universal child allowances, among others, and efforts continued into the 2000s. Over time, these efforts shifted from an initial emphasis on facilitating women’s labor market participation, to urging change in men’s roles, and on to recognizing the connection between changing gender norms, reducing working hours, workstyle reform, and the promotion of diversity and inclusion – often framed as strategies to enhance corporate value and economic competitiveness. The state expanded its efforts as the birthrate continued to slide and then to bottom out at 1.26 in 2005. As we will see, however, official policy was largely rhetorical, and grand gestures toward forging *ikumen* coexisted with historically-entrenched institutional incentives that upheld the status quo.


Child Care and Family Leave laws, for example, created a framework in which all parents,
including men, could take paid time off from work to care for children (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013). The initial law was adopted in 1992 (MHLW, 1992), and various amendments extended the period of leave to 1 year (2005), allowed men with full-time housewives to take leave (2010), and raised the rate of salary reimbursement rate to 67% for a 6 month leave (Gender Equality Bureau, 2017).

However, parental leave was (until recently) available and paid only for full-time, regular workers, not for irregular workers, workers on fixed term contracts, or workers on the job for less than one year. Effectively, these restrictions meant that in the early 2000s parental leave has been available to less than one-fifth of working women (Toivonen, 2007, p. 24). Ironically, then, parental leave was available primarily for men, few of whom actually used it (more on this below).

As early as 1994, the first “Angel Plan” (エンゼルプラン) to combat the declining birthrate recognized the need to shorten working hours, foster greater work-life balance, and promote greater sharing of housework and childrearing between husband and wife (Cabinet Office, 2005; MHLW, 1994). The second Angel Plan of 1999 took this project a step further by proposing that cultural values prioritizing office and wage work at the expense of other areas of life be reformed (MHLW, 1999). The 2002 plan, called “Countermeasures to the Falling Birthrate Plus One” (少子化対策プラスワン), proposed a broad rethinking of men’s workstyles and recognition for greater diversity in workstyles, including flexible work, telecommuting, and career interruptions, as well as the goal of increasing the share of fathers taking parental leave (MHLW, 2002).

Around 2007, the Cabinet Office created a committee consisting of representatives from the Keidanren (Federation of Business Organizations), Rengo (Trade Union Confederation),

---

5Other efforts, include the Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation Children (次世代育成支援対策推進法), a timed legislation passed in 2003, which calls for recognition of fathers’ (as well as mothers’ and guardians’) primary responsibility to raise children (MHLW, 2014).

6Fixed term contract workers were first included (under certain conditions) in 2005. In 2017 the conditions were further changed to include everyone who has been employed for at least one year before a child is born and has a contract until the time the child is 1.5 years old.
and the government, which produced the Work-Life Balance Charter. The Charter recognized the growth of dual income households, and the lack of support for them, and justified work-life balance policies as investments in the future. It included increasing parental leave taking by men as a goal, along with reducing working hours, and getting mothers back to work quickly (Office for Work-Life Balance, 2007). The Cabinet Office then launched the Change! JPN (カエル！ジャパン), or Kaeru! Japan, campaign in 2008, a word play on kaeru, which means both change and frog – featuring a frog as a mascot. The goal was to change working styles and realize work-life balance by utilizing governmental, regional, corporate, and organizational efforts. The main message of Change! JPN is that the lack of work-life balance has resulted in the decline in the birth rate and with it the size of the workforce, therefore negatively affecting society as a whole (Office for Work-Life Balance, 2017). As a result of these efforts, the concept of “work-life balance” gained greater traction throughout society. Though the term appeared in only 2 Asahi Shimbun articles in 2004 and 9 articles in 2005, a whopping 109 articles mentioned and discussed the term in 2008 (Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen, 2011, p. 349).

The second, third, and fourth versions of the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society (男女共同参画社会基本法), which came into effect in 2005, 2010, and 2015 (the first version of the law dates from 2000), included plans targeting fathers. The second Basic Law addressed the need to rethink workstyles (Gender Equality Bureau, 2005), while the third Basic Law aimed to promote work-life balance for both men and women, men’s participation in housework, the normalization of diverse workstyles, changes in the work environment, and the reduction of working hours (Gender Equality Bureau, 2010). This third version set specific numerical goals for decrease in the share of workers with 60+ hour work weeks, an increase in the number of workers taking paid vacation leave, and an increase in the share of men taking parental leave (Gender Equality Bureau, 2010). The fourth Basic Law called for a reform of “men-oriented working styles” (Gender Equality Bureau, 2017).
The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare formally launched the *Ikumen* project in 2010 (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; MHLW, 2017). Then-Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare Nagatsuma Akira used the term in a speech to the Diet and suggested it frame a policy to combat the shrinking population (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013). Nagatsuma explained that *ikumen* is a play on the word *ikuji* (育児), which means child rearing, and *ikemen* (イケメン), which means good-looking man. The concept of *ikumen* thus conceptualizes men who are involved in child rearing and housework as “cool” and attractive (House of Councillors, 2010), creating an alternative masculine ideal to that of the absent salaryman and financial provider. Due in large part to the attention generated by the Diet speech, *ikumen* was named one of the top ten words of the year in 2010 (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky, 2016, p. 213). Between 2008 and 2014, a total of 1,903 newspaper articles mentioned the term, which had virtually never appeared before in print. Widespread use of social media in Japan has fueled diffusion of the concept, as have the interests of commercial capitalism. Companies of different types have used the image of *ikumen* to market their products, such as stylish strollers or baby carriers, and advertisements often feature *ikumen* (Ibid, pp. 214-218).

The *ikumen* project’s principal objective is to persuade more men to take parental leave, with the goal of increasing the share of men who do so to 10% by 2017 and 13% by 2020 (MHLW, 2017). The project website contains resources for men who want to take leave, such as a template for a Paternity Leave notice, as well as a FAQ section that informs men of their legal rights (MHLW, 2017).

In 2012, legislators from different parties formed an *ikumen* caucus in the Diet (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky, 2016, p. 216).

The Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace (女
性の職業生活における活躍の推進に関する法律), which came into force in 2015, recognized that many women are forced to resign from their work due to marriage, pregnancy, birth, child care, and family care, and called for mutual cooperation and sharing between men and women in the family (Gender Equality Bureau, 2015). In addition, the Act requires public and private sector organizations with more than 300 employees to collect and publicize gender-disaggregated data on employment patterns, such as numbers of new hires, career trajectories, working hours, and women in management, and also to develop plans to promote gender equality (Ibid).

2.1 Workstyle Reform

The most recent large initiative to reconstruct men’s roles in Japan is the Prime Minister’s effort to promote workstyle reform. OECD data shows that Japanese work longer hours, on average, than workers in other countries. Working over time, seven days a week, and past midnight is common, and overtime work is poorly regulated. The Labor Standards Law limits working hours to 40 per week, but unions and corporations often agree on up to 45 hours of “service overtime,” and then an unlimited amount of additional overtime for up to six months per year. Some employees literally work themselves to death: the number of suicides on account of karoshi (過労死), or “death by overwork,” exceeded 2,000 in 2015. The government’s white paper on karoshi provided survey results showing that approximately 30% of men and 21% of women reported suffering long working hours, while over half reported feeling worries, concerns, and stress about work.

Feminist activists had for years identified long working hours as a principal obstacle to women’s advancement and changes in men’s roles, but the rest of civil society were slower to recognize its importance. Only after an increasingly diverse group, including men’s movements, work-life balance consultants, private sector corporations, and government bureaucrats joined the chorus did the government begin to act. Reform efforts accelerated after
2015, when a woman employee at the advertising firm Dentsu committed suicide, desperate and depressed after reportedly working over 100 hours of overtime in the previous month.9

In 2016, the Abe government established the Council for the Realization of Workstyle Reform, a committee initially chaired by the PM himself. In 10 meetings taking place over a six month period, the Council developed an ambitious “Action Plan for the Realization of Workstyle Reform,” which committed the state, business, and labor to work together to achieve shared goals. At the final meeting in March 2017, when the Action Plan was formally approved, Abe declared (PMO, 2017):

The approval of the Action Plan for the Realization of Work Style Reform is a historical step for reform to change the work style in Japan. Some have even touted it as a major reform in the history of postwar Japan’s labor laws and regulations […] There may be some people who have doubts as to whether labor customs that have become embedded in Japanese culture and lifestyle for many years can truly be reformed. Be that as it may, I am convinced that when future generations look back, they will surely remember 2017 as the starting point for the changes in the work style in Japan.

The Action plan states that: “The greatest challenge to the revitalization of Japan’s economy is workstyle reform” (Cabinet Office, 2017, p. 2), and then identifies three major areas to tackle. The first is the asymmetry in the conditions, status, treatment, and earnings of regular and non-regular workers. The Plan argues that discrimination against non-regular workers reduces their incentives to improve and innovate and lowers productivity. Meanwhile,

9Civic organizations, such as the Child Caring Men’s Group, Ikujiren, and Fathering Japan had been working on changing men’s roles for years, since the 1970s in the case of the former. In the 2010s, Fathering Japan offered lectures and seminars nationwide on “fathering”, work-life balance, and other issues to help fathers and child-rearing grandfathers. In 2014, the group launched the ikuboss project, referring to a play on the words “ikemen” and “boss,” to persuade managers of the importance of their employees’ and subordinates’ work-life balance, as well as their own (Fathering Japan, 2017). See also Ikujiren (1996); Ishii-Kuntz (2002, 2013).
long working hours depress the birthrate, women’s labor force participation, and men’s contributions at home. Finally, the “single-track career path,” which upholds homogenous norms of workers and working styles, constrains the working opportunities of different groups (including women, young people, and the elderly) and of individuals across their life course (Cabinet Office, 2017).

One of the action plan’s first products was a bill in parliament that capped overtime hours. The result of an agreement forged between between the government, the Keidranren, and Rengo, the proposal was relatively modest: it would limit overtime to an average of 60 hours per month over the course of a year, but up to 100 hours per month during peak times. Critics assailed that such a high overtime ceiling was laughable and could have the result of legitimizing, rather than curbing, overtime.\(^\text{10}\) The government also released a draft of guidelines for equal pay for equal work, intended to align the salary, benefits, training, and education of regular and non-regular workers.

### 2.2 From soft power to slightly less soft power

Until 2017, government policies and promotional campaigns had used soft power to create social change. They urged men to rethink their roles, encouraged greater sharing of household tasks, and advised companies that they needed to change. The state did not penalize corporations for not abiding by these rules or messages, nor did they implement radical changes that forced men to change their behavior. At the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI), for example, officials said that their mission is to convince companies that promoting diversity is not just a matter of corporate social responsibility, philanthropy, or another accessory. Rather, it is an economic policy that promotes corporate value. METI’s diversity 2.0 project aims to enhance corporate value through women’s empowerment, diversity, and inclusion. To “send a message to companies,” they award certifications to companies that

\(^{10}\)See, e.g., editorial in *The Japan Times*, February 28, 2017.
promote women to management and board positions, introduce flexible scheduling, and accommodate parental leave. The idea, they said, is to convince society that diversity is not just for women, but for everyone.\footnote{Interviews at the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) in Tokyo, June 2017.}

Still, messages about diversity and inclusion reform seem to occupy a relatively low priority among the issues framing government-business interaction. One firm told us that diversity and inclusion were far from the main topics they communicated with the government about. The 2016 Act on the Promotion of Women requires companies to make their diversity plans and gender-disaggregated data public, but it does not punish firms that fail to comply with best practices or that fail to make progress on women’s advancement. According to one government official, companies comply because “they want to look good. It helps their evaluation in the stock market.” \footnote{Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.}

Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen (2011, p. 351) attribute the soft nature of the government’s reform message to the power of the business federation (Keidanren) in committees guiding the work-life balance campaign in the mid 2000s. The Keidanren insisted that companies voluntarily pursue work-life balance reforms, and that the government’s job was to create a supportive environment but not produce new laws or regulations.

However, by 2017, the Keidanren (and the government) seem to be changing their approach. Unlike previous efforts, the Action Plan for Workstyle Reform implies actual legislative changes, such as the modification of the Labor Standards Law to impose caps on overtime (anemic as these may be in practice), as well as requirements that non-regular and regular workers receive equal pay and treatment.

Over time, a wide array of actors seem to have become convinced of the connections between work-life balance and diversity on the one hand and economic competitiveness and corporate performance on the other. “Long working hours hinder creative behavior,” as a
METI official put it.\textsuperscript{13} Management studies show that happy workers are productive workers, and job flexibility and work-life balance improve performance. The Japanese government and top corporate executives know these studies, and recognize that the need to remain competitive in the global economy requires that their companies adapt and diversify. A CEO said, “these changes are pushed by globalization, by the changing world economy […] it’s not just our idea or the Abe government’s idea […] people complain about the speed of change, but we need to change so many things.”\textsuperscript{14} A METI official added: ”The external environment is changing, and it’s not so easy to follow those changes with homogeneous workers […] diversity is a tool to change the homogeneous human portfolio.”\textsuperscript{15}

The project of advancing women and changing men’s roles is thus tightly linked to changes in the norms of working life, to corporate practices, the cultural scripts informing the construction of individual identities, and to the deeper organization of the political economy. Though leaders recognize and accept the need for change, old ways are deeply ingrained. As one CEO put it, “Though we are trying to change lifetime employment, the social understandings of big companies still favor lifetime employment.”\textsuperscript{16} A METI official said, “Not to change is not an option for us […] but there’s a big fight inside of companies.”

As we see below, however, it is not just ingrained habits or traditions that are at stake. Rather, there are concrete institutional incentives embedded in the tax rules and the civil code, among others, to continue to behave in the old ways, as absent salarymen, as fathers without an active parenting role. There are fewer proposals to change these other institutions thwarting work-life balance, and those that have been initiated have met with resistance, or not been launched at all.

\textsuperscript{13}Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
\textsuperscript{14}Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
\textsuperscript{15}Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
\textsuperscript{16}Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
3 Gap Between Attitudes and Behavior

The state efforts to change gender roles have been going on for almost three decades, with a focus on men since around the year 2000. Parallel to the evolution of governmental rhetoric and policy, can we observe changes in attitudes or behavior? In this section we show that *attitudes* about gender roles have changed considerably. Behavior has changed less and there is a significant gap between ideas and reality, between aspiration and achievement. In this section, we chart the gap using survey data and interview evidence,\(^\text{17}\) and begin to explore the contradictions between official rhetoric, changing attitudes, and persisting norms and incentives.

The first survey we look at was conducted by Rengo (the Japanese Trade Union Confederation) in 2014, of 1000 working men aged 20–59.\(^\text{18}\) Some 525 of the respondents had children. The survey includes specific questions about fatherhood and attitudes toward paternity leave.

The second survey data source consists of the Japanese General Social Survey (JGSS), which involves nationwide polls of men and women aged 20-89 that have been carried out regularly since 2000.\(^\text{19}\) To study changes over time, we look at the surveys conducted in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2010, and 2012. The survey sample was 4,500 people in 2000 and gradually increased to 9,000 people in 2012. The response rates in these surveys was between 50 and 60%.

First, we focus on the Rengo data, which reveal a stark difference in the attitudes among men toward balancing work and family and the reality that they live. In the left panel of Figure 1 we see that a high share of men with children say either that they would like to

\(^{17}\)See Appendix A for information about our interviews.

\(^{18}\)We are very grateful to Kumie Inoue and to Yuko Sugamura of Rengo for sharing these data with us.

\(^{19}\)The JGSS are designed and conducted by the JGSS Research Center at Osaka University of Commerce (Joint Usage/Research Center for Japanese General Social Surveys accredited by Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), in collaboration with the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo.
prioritize their children over work or that they would like to balance work and child rearing. The responses vary by age group: from 89% in the 20-29 age group down to 76% in the 50-59 age group. This suggests that a high number of all men would like to spend time and effort on their children, and the numbers are even higher for young men.

This desire to balance work and family life is not, however, reflected in the day-to-day lives of all those men. In the right panel we see the share of men who actually think that they are able to prioritize their children or balance work and child rearing. Here the overall numbers are much lower, but we also see generational differences with the younger respondents being less likely to say that their work takes priority.

Figure 1: Attitudes and realities of work-life balance among working men with children

Paternity leave has been an important part of the ikumen agenda. As discussed above, men have the right to paid leave and (as this is an easily observable measure of changing gender roles) it is something that receives considerable public attention. Managers of government agencies are reportedly under pressure to encourage men to take the leave, and to require at least one man to serve as the “sacrificial lamb” in this regard, in order to show they are conforming with policy. A small number of companies in Japan actually require
men to take at least 5 days of paternity leave.

However, in our survey data, the gap between aspiration and reality is clearly visible in behavior surrounding paternity leave. Of all the respondents in the Rengo survey (with and without children) about 69% said they knew about the child care leave law and 61% said they knew it also applied to men. The numbers were somewhat higher (73% and 68%) when we reduce the sample to men with children. This suggests that many, although far from all, men are aware of their right to paternity leave.

Whether they know about their right to paternity leave or not, few men actually take such leave. Of the men with children in the Rengo survey, less than 6% said they had taken any paternity leave at all. The share of young men with children saying that they had taken leave is somewhat higher (11%), but the rates are still low. A common perception in Japan is that men do not wish to take leave, but in this survey sample 45% of the men with children said they had wanted to take leave but had not taken it because they felt they could not; 6% said they had taken it; the rest said they had not wanted to take leave. Though again, the younger the men, the less likely they were to say they did not want it.

Of the men without kids in the survey sample, 26% said they want to take leave and think they can, but 52% say they feel they cannot. And again, younger men were more positive to take leave. Here too we see a clear generational change, if not in actual behavior at least in attitudes.

Among our interview respondents, none of the men had personally taken paternity leave, though most were able to identify other male colleagues who had taken leave. This included employees of institutions that actively work to increase the uptake of paternity leave. Similarly, none of the men interviewed by Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky (2016, p. 223) in their article about the ikumen phenomenon had taken parental leave either, though some had taken some of their annual paid leave in order to be present at the births of their children. When we asked our interviewees why they hadn’t taken leave, many said that it
had simply never occurred to them. One executive said: “I’m 50. I have three daughters. I have never taken paternity leave.” When we asked him if he would have liked to take it, he replied: “I didn’t think about it.”

Several people also remarked on enduring cultural hostility to paternity leave.

In the Ministry of Labor, we were told that managers speak to new fathers directly to persuade them to take the leave, and the minister meets with all managerial staff once a month to remind them of the need to facilitate a supportive climate for fathers. Approximately 30% of men who work in the Ministry take paternity leave, though for a short period of less than one week.

Among men in the Rengo survey who had taken leave, 67% said they had taken less than 5 days. It is important to note, however, that many new fathers take advantage of the annual paid leave they are entitled to under the Labor Standards Law (LSL). The LSL requires employers to grant employees up to 20 days of leave per year, at full pay (paid by the employer), for any reason (such as holidays). Most Japanese take only about 10 days (if that, indeed, getting workers to take leave for longer periods is another goal of the workstyle reform project). Ministry of Labor surveys show that approximately 40% of men say they take annual paid leave for the purposes of child care (more broadly, not necessarily of a newborn).

One obstacle to paternity leave is harassment, which includes threatening, bullying, or making fun of men who declare their intention to take leave or who actually take it. Whereas maternity harassment (matahara, マタハラ) has received attention in the media and is being actively address by government agencies, paternity harassment (patahara, パタハラ) receives less attention. Some 12% of the men with children in the Rengo survey said they had experienced paternity harassment.

---

20Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
21Interviews at the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare; interview with Professor Glenda Roberts.
22Interviews at the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare.
To chart the gap between attitudes and behaviors in a larger sample, we turn to analysis of the JGSS data. In comparative perspective, average Japanese attitudes toward gender roles and family values tend to be conservative. For example, three-quarters of Japanese surveyed in the 2012 International Social Survey stated that care for children under school age should be provided primarily by family members (Fleckenstein and Lee, 2017, p. 19). Our analysis affirms these findings, though also reveals changes in attitudes toward gender roles over time alongside a persisting sexual division of labor in practice.

The top panel of Figure 2 shows that 55% of all respondents in the JGSS survey from 2000 said they “Agreed” or “Somewhat agreed” with the statement “A husband’s job is to earn money; a wife’s job is to look after the home and family.” This number had gone down to 47% by 2012. In the bottom panel of Figure 2 we see that although 65% of the respondents in the 2000 survey “Agreed” or “Somewhat agreed” to the statement that “A woman’s happiness lies in a marriage,” this number had gone down to 46% by 2012. These trends suggest that aggregate attitudes are becoming more supportive of multiple masculine and feminine identities.

And whereas there was little change in the perception that a wife should not work if the husband earned enough, as shown in the top panel of Figure 3, a high and increasing share of survey respondents thought that men should be able to cook and take care of themselves (bottom panel).

Alongside these gradual changes in attitudes, actual behavior continues to uphold a strict sexual division of labor. Men work much more outside the home, and women retain the vast majority of responsibility for work inside of the home. For example, the left panel of Figure 4 shows the percentage of men and women aged 30–50 who said they worked in the previous week. The right panel shows the same percentages for men and women aged 30–50 who had at least one child younger than the age of 16. There are at least three patterns worth noting in these plots. First, the share of workers is consistently lower among women than
Figure 2: Changes in attitudes toward gender roles, 2000–2012

A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family

A woman's happiness lies in a marriage

Answers: Agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Disagree
Figure 3: Attitudes toward men’s work in the house, 2000–2012

If a husband has sufficient income, it is better for his wife not to have a job

Men should cook and look after themselves
among men. Among the female survey respondents aged 30–50 in the 2000 survey, 69% said they worked, compared to 97% among the men. Second, the share of women working is even lower in the sub-sample with at least one young child: 64% said they worked, compared to 99% of the men. And finally, there was almost no change in these numbers between 2000 and 2012, despite the constant government efforts to get more women into the workforce.

Figure 4: Percentage of men and women who said they worked the previous week (ages 30–50)

Similar patterns emerge if we look at the average working hours among those who worked, as shown in Figure 5. In 2000, men reported an average of 48 working hours, while women reported an average of 33 working hours. Among parents with young children, fathers reported to work an average of 49 hours, while mothers reported an average of 29 hours – and this is among the 64% of mothers who said they worked at all. Here too there is little change over time.

The sexual division of labor is also clearly visible in data on men and women’s contribution
to household chores. In Figure 6 we show the percentage of respondents aged 30–50 with at least one child younger than the age of 16 who reported that they never cooked dinner, did laundry, or cleaned the house. Almost none of the female respondents fell into this category, in fact most female respondents said they cooked and cleaned almost every day. Across the years, close to 40% of the male respondents said they never cooked dinner and more than 40% said they never did laundry. However, we see some change in the question about cleaning. Here, more than 20% of the male respondents said they never cleaned in the house in the early 2000s, while this had gone down to about 15% by the 2012 survey.

During our fieldwork in Japan, interviewees were aware of the campaigns for work-life balance, active fathering, workstyle reform, and the criticism that the long hours spent at work are unproductive and unnecessary. But there was clearly a generational and status difference in how these messages were received. One government official told us that top
managers have an adept understanding of the need for workstyle reform, as does the younger generation: both believe that work life balance is good for profit, that it increases loyalty to company, and that it helps retain talented employees. But the mindset of middle managers impedes change. Even when they accept the premise of workstyle reform, it’s hard to execute, and also hard to manage parental leaves (for example, many workers believe that taking leaves makes other team members work longer hours). Middle managers think that each job requires specific skills, and that it’s hard to find someone to cover an “expert’s” job.\textsuperscript{23}

Another official said that the older generation of middle managers that came of age during the “Japanese miracle,” or post-war economic boom, witnessed the success of the lifetime employment model of homogeneous male workers. He observed: “in the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese companies had a strong position in global market, and with homogeneous workers. Senior people remember those days!”\textsuperscript{24}

Other managers took pains to explain to us that, in fact, long working hours were not always wasted and that people were in fact spending those hours in the office productively.

\textsuperscript{23}Interview, Tokyo, June 2017. 
\textsuperscript{24}Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
Others noted that, for workers (especially men) long accustomed to spending hours at the office, home life was unfamiliar, and they didn’t always feel welcome there.

As the survey data and our interviews show, many men’s identities are still centered on work. One executive confessed that, “I work hard. In this past month, I was in Europe one week, US one week, and Asia one week. I really feel this is important, for the company, for society, for policy making. I feel responsible. I am highly motivated to work.” Another said, “Working hard is like playing on an American football team: hard time, tough work, but sometimes we achieve some goals.”

Commitment to work thus limits take-up of the *ikumen* role promoted by the government and some social movements. One interviewee in the study conducted by Mizukoshi, et. al. observed, “I have the feeling that the word *ikumen* is going ahead by itself. I don’t think that it is a realistic scenario that the husband is completely involved in childcare and helping out his wife all the time. That’s not a thing that’s really happening, and while it would be good if the word going ahead by itself would become a cue for men to become involved, I don’t have a feeling like ‘should I become an *ikumen*?’” (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky, 2016, p. 223).

Yet cracks are appearing, as the striking narrative of another executive shows: “From 2011 to 2015 I worked in India, and my way of thinking changed dramatically. I felt that we should enjoy our lives. In India, people worked, but also enjoyed life. I’m 50, and now thinking about the next 50 years. In India, people arrived late, left early, and took a long lunch. People love family. They don’t want to work all the time. We were establishing a regional headquarters in Delhi. It was a lot of work. I sometimes asked people to come to work on Saturdays and Sundays and they didn’t come. (In Japan, they came on Saturdays 25 Interviews, Tokyo, June 2017.

26 The principal argument of Mizukoshi et. al.’s study is that there are weak and strong versions of *ikumen*, and that the weaker versions are more acceptable to people they interviewed. This means that men are more inclined to want to help out with household chores and parenting than to take a year off to become primary parents, even for a while (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky, 2016).
and Sundays without hesitation!). In Japan, people love their families, but feel a sense of obligation and responsibility to the company.”27 Today’s challenge is for the government and other reformers to convince people that putting family first may benefit the company too.

4 What limits change?

The Japanese welfare state was historically based on the male-breadwinner model, the assumption of lifetime employment, and the understanding that reproductive labor (care of children, elderly, and the household) would be performed by women in the home (Fleckenstein and Lee, 2017; Lambert, 2007; Osawa, 1994; Peng, 2002; Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen, 2011). Related institutions, such as the tax system, evolved with the same understanding (Toyofuku, 2014). Now, the state recognizes that its survival depends on overhauling these institutions, but is adopting only a piecemeal effort to do so. Our fieldwork revealed that it is not just working hours, but an entire constellation of rules and practices that uphold the salaryman and 100% mother ideals (cf. Estévez-Abe, 2013).

Consider the seniority system, which governs status, promotion, and pay in public and private sector organizations. By simply being present and enduring grueling hours, workers will ascend the corporate ladder. The need to be present leads to the practice of overtime, which sociological and anthropological analyses show is important to demonstrate commitment, forge consensus, and develop a common identity among workers. Overtime is also miserable. Robert Dujarric, the director of the Asian Studies Center at Temple University in Tokyo, observed that “working at a Japanese company is one step above being in prison.”28 One public sector manager recalled that he and others of his generation worked under a “militaristic totalitarian command structure” while in their 20s, as “soldiers without

27 These narratives all come from interviews conducted in Tokyo in June, 2017.
28 Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
human rights.”

It is widely recognized that organizational evaluation criteria should shift from seniority to performance, and many organizations have set up systems of intersubjective performance evaluation, in which supervisors and even subordinates complete surveys. One middle aged-manager, however, described the transition from seniority to performance evaluation as “painfully difficult.”

The tax system is another obstacle. The head of household may receive a tax deduction for a dependent spouse, even one who works, provided that the spouse does not earn more than about 1.6 million yen per year. The persistence of the deduction, commonly referred to as the “1.6 million yen ceiling,” enforces strong incentives for women to be housewives or take low-paying jobs. Though intended in part to provide partial welfare benefits to compensate women for their otherwise unpaid domestic labor, the fact that such compensation occurs via tax credits on a husband’s income reinforces the traditional division of labor between men and women (Osawa, 1994, p. 164). What is more, families are typically entitled to a tax credit if three generations are residing together, which encourages at-home caretaking as opposed to defamilization.

Pensions are also important. Everyone is entitled to a minimum pension, but people only have to pay into the pension system if their income exceeds certain levels, around 1.6 m yen. Like the tax laws, pension rules reduces women’s incentives to take on more than part-time low-paid jobs (provided they are married with a working spouse) (Peng, 2002). According to two interview respondents, many jobs are designed to be “pocket-money” jobs for women. When we asked how this was signalled through job announcements they said that you “just know.”

Third, the household registration system (koseki) dating back to the Meiji period

---

29Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
30Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
31Interview, Tokyo, June 2017.
connects all citizens to the state by virtue of their membership in a family (ie), for which there is a designated household head and a common surname. Though the postwar civil code introduced the principle of gender equality and granted men and women formally equal rights and obligations, the government continued to require household members to register as a koseki under a common surname, though the koseki unit was shifted to the nuclear family from the large, extended ie (Shin, 2008).

Another change was that the surname did not have to be the man’s; families were free to choose the woman’s surname (though in practice, merely three percent did) (Shin, 2008). Through these rules, the state effectively compels women to give up their names upon marriage, which many associate with a loss of their independent and professional identities. This rule thereby reinforces the idea of the woman as dependent and the man as the main breadwinner. Government and legislative efforts to revise the name laws have all failed, as conservatives have mobilized against perceived threats to Japanese family values (Ibid). Though public opinion has shifted on this issue significantly since the 1970s, court rulings in 2015 and 2016 upheld the common surname requirement and stated that it did not place an undue burden on women.

Fourth, alongside changes in parental leave and child-care provision intended to push more women into the workforce and bring fathers home, the Japanese government has extended the provision of child allowances. The policy of paying monthly sums to families with children dates from the 1970s, when intended primarily as a form of income support for poorer families with multiple children. Subsequently, the government expanded the scope of the policy by raising, and then eliminating, income thresholds, applying it for all children, and extending coverage until children turn 14 (An and Peng, 2016, p.9). In its rationale for the allowances, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) stated that “The child allowance law aims to contribute to the stability of family life […] with the basic recognition that parents and other guardians have the primary recognition of child rearing” (Ibid). Scholars believe
that the system runs contrary to the principle of defamilization of care, and that it effectively creates incentives for women to stay home – thereby upholding a traditional sexual division of labor.

Finally, we were also told that the procedure for obtaining a home mortgage may constitute a deterrent to men taking parental leave. Loan officers analyze employment histories, and calculate mortgage eligibility, in part, on the basis of years and months on the job. Many men believe that if they take parental leave, the time away will not count as time working, and will be held against them when and if they apply for a mortgage.

5 Conclusions

The Japanese government and other social actors seek to change gender roles in order to support an aging society, produce more children, and enhance corporate innovation and productivity. In recognition of the findings of decades of feminist scholarship, the state has recognized that gender is not just about women, but rather a system of social norms and relations. It is not enough just to focus on women’s lives and opportunities. Changing gender involves and includes men. To promote diversity and inclusion, the state has thus launched a campaign to induce men to become *ikumen*, or active fathers.

In spite of decades of legislation and promotional campaigns that provide for gender-neutral parental leave and encourage work-life balance, survey data show that behavior has hardly budged. However, attitudes have gradually shifted. More men want to be active fathers, take some paternity leave, and assume more responsibility in the home.

The problem is that material incentives are stacked against their ability to do so. Living the life of an *ikumen* is risky. Under the seniority system, taking parental leave or other time off of work may jeopardize promotion and pay. Tax laws impose a penalty on dual-career families. And supervisors, co-workers, and mortgage loan officers expect years of continuous
employment. Deviating from the salary man ideal is not just a matter of rebelling against oppressive social norms. It imposes tangible material costs.

This situation resembles a collective action problem. Society as a whole will gain if more men become *ikumen*: women will work, families will breed, public coffers will grow, and the state will avert fiscal crisis. But as individuals, men confront incentives to conform to traditional roles in order to insure their own – and their families’ – financial security. There is a misalignment between societal and individual well being.

To offer great incentives for behavioral change, the state should alter individual calculations of risk and benefit. Through policy changes, such as the “use it or lose it” daddy leave pioneered in Norway, men could enjoy financial benefits, rather than suffer financial penalties, for taking parental leave and otherwise acting like *ikumen*. Promoting change in social norms involves material inducements, not just rhetorical appeals.
References


Gender Equality Bureau, Government of Japan. 2015. “女性の職業生活における活躍の推進に関する法律 (The Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and The Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace).”.


MHLW, Government of Japan. 1992. “育児休業、介護休業等育児又は家族介護を行う労働者の福祉に関する法律 (Ordinance for Enforcement of the Act on Childcare Leave, Caregiver Leave, and Other Measures for the Welfare of Workers Caring for Children or Other Family Members).”. 31


Shimbun, Mainichi. 2017. “ストーリー「イクメン」の言葉なくしたい（その2）イクメンは当然だ (Story: We want to eliminate the word ”Ikumen” - Ikumen is normal).” *Mainichi Shimbun*.

Shin, Ki-Young. 2008. “”The Personal is the Political”: Women’s Surname Change in Japan.” *Journal of Korean Law* 8:161–179.


33
A Interviews

To understand more about the attitudes toward gender roles, state efforts to promote fathering, work-life balance, workstyle reform, and mechanisms that may prevent societal change, we conducted semi-structured interviews in Tokyo in June 2017.

Our interviewees included government officials, representatives of civil society, academics, business people, workers, and students. The interviews ranged from about half an hour to three hours and were conducted in English or Japanese depending on the preference of the respondents.

See Table 1 for a list of our interview respondents. Our analysis is also informed by Sonntag’s upbringing in Japan, as well as Htun’s year living in Tokyo in 2006-2007.

Table 1: Name and organization of interview respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Name and Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aziz Aditya, Faizah, Temple University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cai Ni, Coffee, Temple University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chang, Annie, ACE Global Solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dujarric, Robert, Temple University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fujisawa, Hideaki, METI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Fukumoto, Yukari, Kakimoto Arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Genka, Makiko, Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Hayashi, Yoshiko, Waseda University; Journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hiramatsu, Kozo, KOZOcom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hiwatari, Nobuhiro, Tokyo University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Hiwatari, Yumi, Sophia University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hymans, Jacques, University of Southern California</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Name and organization of interview respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inoue, Kumie</td>
<td>Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishibashi, Hidenobu</td>
<td>Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishii-Kuntz, Masako</td>
<td>Ochanomizu University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabran, Chriselle</td>
<td>TMJ Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kage, Rieko</td>
<td>Tokyo University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kan, Seigo</td>
<td>Waseda University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasuya, Yuko</td>
<td>Keio University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsui, Rihito</td>
<td>Hitachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsuo, Miwa</td>
<td>Tokyo Gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minagawa, Masumi</td>
<td>Posi-Net</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miura, Mari</td>
<td>Sophia University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miwa, Takane</td>
<td>Hitachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inoue Nagisa</td>
<td>(formerly) Goldman Sachs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakanishi, Hiroaki</td>
<td>Hitachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katsuko Nanao</td>
<td>Nanao Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ochiai, Miho</td>
<td>Hitachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberts, Glenda</td>
<td>Waseda University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rokumoto, Kayo</td>
<td>Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakai, Moe</td>
<td>METI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shin, Ki-Young</td>
<td>Ochanomizu University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugamura, Yuko</td>
<td>Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunami, Akihiko</td>
<td>Abandoned Chemical Weapons Office, Cabinet Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzuki, Yoshiko</td>
<td>Grief Counseling Center</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Name and organization of interview respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Takuechi, Yasuko</td>
<td>Hitachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toyofuku, Miki</td>
<td>Ochanomizu University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamano, Yoichi</td>
<td>Hitachi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>