

The Past, Present, and Future of Parental Leave System in the Japanese Diet

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Introduction

Entering into the 2020s, traditional culture which assigned gender roles in Japan gradually loses its influence on younger generations. Increasing number of Japanese women now choose to have children later, or not at all, as they have career goals but struggle to find a balance between work and family life. While many are aware of Japan's low birth rate, few policymakers have effective solutions. Diet women, when solving this issue, could be a helpful resource and a speaker for all Japanese women by addressing their needs and advocating for reforms. However, according to a data study from Nippon.com, female representation in the Japanese Diet remained at around 10%, ranked the lowest in both G8 and G20 and placed only at the 165th globally.¹ The proportion of female members in national parliaments around the globe has increased from 11.3% in 1995 to 24.3% in January 2019—yet Japan still remains below the 1995 level.²

Acknowledging such low representation of female politicians could be the result of complex

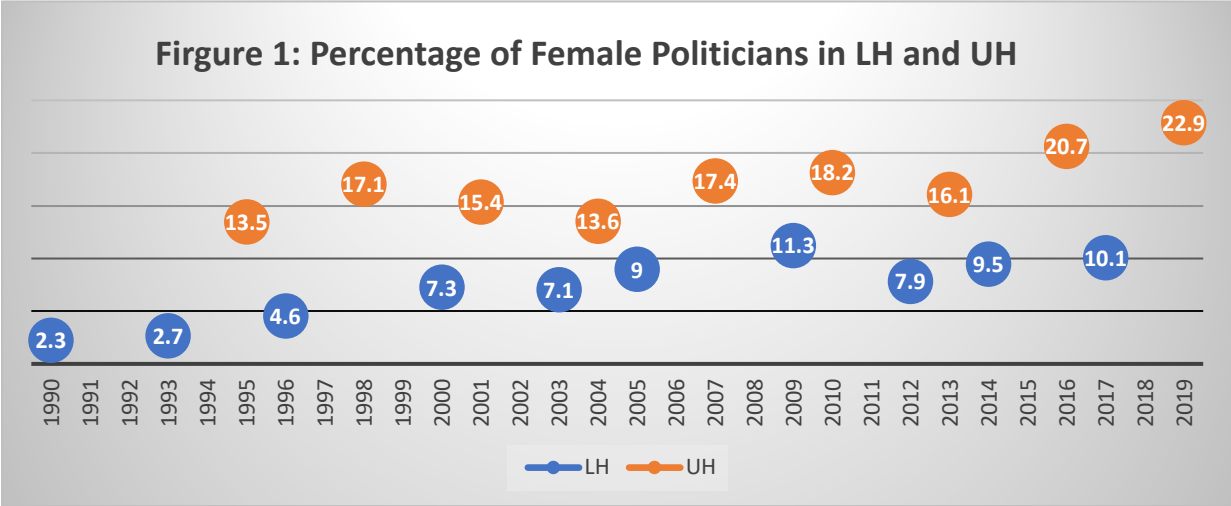
¹ “Gender Imbalance: Japan's Political Representation by Women Lowest in G20.” *Nippon.com*, 30 May 2020, www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00409/gender-imbalance-japan%E2%80%99s-political-representation-by-women-lowest-in-g20.html.

² Ibid.

social problems, cultural stigma, or specific political environment during elections, this paper will mainly focus on the development of parental leave system in the Diet and how it affects Japanese women participating in politics. When the government is unable to create a welcoming working environment for the very policymaker themselves, how it is going to help its citizens facing the same problem? This paper will briefly summarize the history of maternity leave system in the Diet and analyze its influence on numbers of congresswomen. Towards the end, emerging trend of paternity leave and policy suggestions will also be discussed.

Background on Maternity Leave

The proportion of female politicians in both the Upper and Lower House of the Japanese Diet has remained relatively low. In the most recent 9 elections, the Upper House had an average of 17.2% female representation, which was much higher than that of LH’s 7.2% (Figure 1).



Source: <https://www.sendai-l.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/pdf-chousa-5-3-1-190909.pdf>

When comparing horizontally, Japan’s proportion of female members in the Diet is still lower than over 150 countries in the world. There are multiple discouraging factors that hindered Japanese women from starting a political career, and one of the most basic and practical problem

is the unwelcoming environment for female politicians who plan to have children. Similar to many other Japanese women who faced a difficult balance between family life and work, those doing politics have a more intense working environment and receive higher expectations from others. Having children could be fatal for a woman's career — during an interview between scholar Susan Holloway and a Japanese housewife, the interviewee told the story that she had to accept a condition of not having children for two years prior to joining a new project at work.³ Childbearing is a taboo for salary-women in Japan because it simply means they could not generate profits for the company in a period of time, which make their human capital worthless, thus more likely to get fired than their male counterparts. Although Japan has the second largest higher educational system in the developed world that could ensure women to receive elite education, it remains to be one of the few countries where a graph of women's employment trajectory over their lifetime still forms an “M” shape, with high rates of employment prior to child rearing, a deep dip during the childbearing years, and a rise when the children begin school.⁴ In order to solve this M-shape trend and increase the declining labor force, the government had tried to implement reform policies, including increasing childcare facilities and improving the parental leave system for families with new members, yet Diet women seemed to be excluded from the benefits until recently.

Mothers are entitled to up to 10 months of parental leave (PL) after maternity leave (ML) (which is 42 days before and 56 days after childbirth) under the Child Care and Family Care

³ Holloway, Susan D. “Balancing Work and Family Life.” Chapter. In *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 171. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511761317.010.

⁴ Ellington, Lucien. “Japanese Education” *FSI*, 2005. spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/japanese_education; Holloway, “Balancing Work and Family Life”, 171.

Leave Act (1992).⁵ However, this was not applicable for the Japanese Diet. There were even no regulations on ML in the Diet until a UH female member, Hashimoto Seiko, delivered her child in 2000 and urged for ML system to be written in the rules. In her personal blog, Hashimoto, the current Minister of the Tokyo Olympics and Women Empowerment, wrote that she was the second congresswoman to have a child while serving in the Diet in the postwar history.⁶ Without taking the maternity leave, she worked the day before the child was born and returned to office after a week of her delivery.⁷ This was truly amazing, yet nearly impossible for others to imitate. Moreover, the place — Nagata Machi — that she was working in didn't have a childcare facility, so the former-Olympic athlete had to bring her daughter with her when going to make speeches and run her campaign in the area.⁸ There were simply no maternity leave system nor childcare facilities designed for women in the Diet.⁹ Being through the childbearing process herself and realizing her other female colleagues would face the same hardship, Hashimoto spoke up and successfully help win the rights of ML in the Upper House. Months after her daughter was born, maternity leave were written down in the Rules of the House of Councillors, clearly adding child delivery to be one of excuses for absence and the member could take a leave upon UH president's approval.¹⁰ Led by this positive change in the UH, the same rule was added to the LH, following a female LH member delivered her child in 2001.¹¹

⁵ Asai, Yukiko. "Parental Leave Reforms and the Employment of New Mothers: Quasi-experimental Evidence From Japan." *Labour Economics*, vol. 36, 1 Oct. 2015, pp. 72 - 83.

⁶ Hashimoto, Seiko. "Passionate! What I've learned about child-raising" Hashimoto Official Site, <https://www.seiko-hashimoto.net/h005>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mizushima, Hiroko. "On Congressman's Maternity Leave System" *Personal Blog*, 2001. <http://www.hirokom.org/opinion/op003.html>

¹⁰ "Rules of the House of Councillors" The National Diet of Japan, <https://www.sangiin.go.jp/japanese/aramashi/houki/kisoku.html>

¹¹ Komado (Pen name). "Cases of Diet members' maternity leave, and male members too" *Senkyo.com*, 2015. <https://go2senkyo.com/articles/2015/12/26/13252.html>

Result of the Maternity Leave Reform in the Diet

After the reforms in 2000 and 2001, maternity leave was allowed in both the UH and the LH. However, the number of female members declined in the subsequent elections as shown in Figure 1. Although there was no clear positive correlation between the reform and the number of women serving in the Diet, it did not prove the reform to be ineffective or unwelcomed. After the ML rule was added to the book, nine female politicians were able to take maternity leave from 2000 to 2015.¹² Although nine cases seems like a small number, it is still a huge step in the Diet where there was only one ML taken in a 50-year window. It should also be noted that many congresswomen were already mothers when serving in the Diet, making the need for taking the ML more unlikely. Nevertheless, implementation of the ML system in the Diet will attract more young blood into the government as they don't need to be rushing between the hospital and office as Hashimoto once did. Improvement of the ML system will also bring many other positives changes in the society like equal participation and creating a sustainable society, as well as being an effective tool to solve the problem of low birthrate.¹³ The Diet should be the pioneer in Japan if it wants to explore more opportunities for its people, not the last one to adapt. Only if the policymakers experience it first, they will then have the incentive and solid reasoning to convince others to pass a bill or enact a reform. Bottom-up process surely has its unique advantage, but there are times when top-down decisions are needed to achieve a quick turnover.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nakatani, Tazuma (Current LH member). "Why it is necessary to promote ML and PL? Reflections on Minister's PL" *Seijiyama.com*, 2020. <https://seijiyama.jp/article/news/nws20200116.html>

Trend of Paternity Leave

Parental leave is a broad term that includes both maternal and paternal responsibilities, implying both parents have equal duty when it comes to childcare. It is a much different picture in Japan that, seemingly untouched by the gender revolution occurring around the globe, Japanese women tended to marry young, then drop out of the labor market and devote themselves to raising children and caring for their hardworking husbands, thus creating an imbalance where husbands have little to do with housework and child-raising.¹⁴ Low rate of paternity leave is a good indicator of Japanese father's absence before, during, or after the infant is born, though the option was offered. The situation could be summarized as "I want but I won't," coined by two Japanese authors explaining how men were often stigmatized and fear receiving negative evaluation from others in the organizational climate in workplaces.¹⁵ Stigma in a political environment can be worse than that in an ordinary company. Till this day, unfortunately, there were no written rules granting fathers to take paternity leave when serving in the UH or the LH. However, there were several successful cases of male members applied and were allowed to take a leave for their newborn babies. The first paternity leave was granted to a LH member named Yamahana Ikuo in the 2001, and this eight-day absence invoked a hot debate on whether the decision was appropriate.¹⁶ In the same year, LH female member Mizushima Hiroko delivered her child and led to a LH reform on maternity leave. During the speech that Mizushima made in the 151th Congressional meeting, she emphasized the importance of an

¹⁴ Holloway, 3.

¹⁵ Miyajima, Takeru, and Hiroyuki Yamaguchi. "I Want to but I Won't: Pluralistic Ignorance Inhibits Intentions to Take Paternity Leave in Japan." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8, 2017, p. 1508., doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01508.

¹⁶ Mizushima, Hiroko. (Speech at the 151th Congress Meeting, Tokyo Japan, June 8th, 2001). The House of Representatives Official Website, http://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_kaigirokua.nsf/html/kaigirokua/000115120010608037.htm

advanced parental leave system, including both paternity and maternity, and also mentioned Yamahana's case. She believed that there should be a consensus on supporting parental leave system, and the debate on Yamahana's absence revealed the disappointing reality in Japan in which some people were still hanging onto the opinion of "men make houses, women make home".¹⁷ Yamahana himself also realized that there haven't been much changes after he took the first paternity leave.¹⁸ Vox populi changed its direction when the former PM Koizumi's son, Koizumi Shinjiro, filed a paternity leave application this year and received support not only from the Japanese people, but also from many other politicians. The current young Minister of Environment was allowed for a two-week break in order to take care of his wife and new-born child. In his personal blog, Koizumi wrote that after knowing the drastic change in hormone level during pregnancy and child delivery could cause postpartum depression, he became more determined to take the paternal leave so that he could take care of his family.¹⁹ While around 80% of newly hired male employees wished to take paternity leave, only 6.16% were able to do so.²⁰ As a charming young leader, Koizumi's courage and honesty will affect more fathers to speak up and get what they and their families deserve, since paternity leave is not supposed to be shameful, but rather an act of responsibility — what could be more "manly" than that? According to a survey conducted after Koizumi's paternity leave, 75.3% of the 1178 respondents with young children gave positive feedback, and over 80% agreed that the current environment

¹⁷ Ibid; Miyajima & Yamaguchi.

¹⁸ Yamahana, Ikuo. "On paternity leave" Yamaha Official Site, August 21st, 2019. <https://yamahanaikuo.com/20190821-2/>

¹⁹ Koizumi, Shinjiro. "On Getting Parental Leave" Ameba.com, 2020. <https://ameblo.jp/koizumi-shinjiro/entry-12567173956.html>

²⁰ Ibid.

made paternity leave difficult to apply and get permitted.²¹ Koizumi's colleague also complimented his action by posting on Twitter and calling for more public attention on paternity leave. LDP Senator Mori Masako described it as a delightful news, and a leader's action is necessary in order to change the current difficult situation for paternity leave.²² Citizens look up to the leaders of their country, and the latter can be good role models if they were to act first. Although there is no official reform on paternity leave for Diet members yet, the new PM, Suga, stated that it would be possible for congressmen to apply even if the rules were not written down.²³

Future Potentials

Although there has not been a huge increase in female Diet members as the result of maternity leave reform nor many cases of parental leaves taken, positive feedback and public support are constantly being observed. Indeed, politics could be a grey area for parental leave because Diet member's voting right is crucial and closely related to the future of the country. As the result, politicians are more likely to be criticized if they take long parental leave that could potentially hinder the decision-making process. Furthermore, Japanese government provides paid leave for Diet members, meaning they will receive salary, most likely tax money, when on

²¹ Wizleap. "Survey on Parental Leave and its Environment" PR Times.jp, 2020. <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000018.000052686.html>

²² Mori, Masako. Twitter Post. Jan. 14th, 2020. <https://twitter.com/morimasakosangi/status/1217244912464220160?s=20>

²³ NHK News. "Cabinet Members could Apply for Parental Leave without Rules in Place" NHK Politics Magazine, 2019. <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/statement/22684.html>

leave.²⁴ This could also be a discouraging factor if the government were to seek public support for parental leave system for Diet members.

Two policies might help to resolve this issue: shorten the duration of the leave and build childcare facilities designed for Diet members. The first policy is rather easier to be put in place as politicians themselves understood the time of absence should not be too long. Yamahana's paternity leave was only eight days, and Koizumi's was two-week.²⁵ The duration of parental leave can be individualized and be decided based on a careful assessment of both family life and work. With detailed explanation and an honest appeal to the public, it will not be too difficult to have people's support, as most will understand the hardship of early parenting and how it might have conflicts with work. The second possible solution for Diet members' work-life balance is childcare facilities designed specially them. Not everyone could carry infants around while running a political campaign like Hashimoto did, so a specially designed childcare facility could be an efficient way to solve this problem. Having their children to be taken good care in the facility, fathers and mothers could then work without concerns or taking a long parental leave. This method was already put into practice in the US and Sweden and was proved to be successful.²⁶ Even if the public oppose to spend tax revenue on building Diet-member only childcare facilities, the government can also make sure that there are accessible daycare centers close to the offices, or the Diet members could be waived from the long waitlist.

²⁴ Mizushima, Blog.

²⁵ Mizushima, Speech; Koizumi, Blog.

²⁶ Mizushima, Blog.

Conclusion

Japanese society till this day still faces several serious problems, including diminishing labor forces, low birthrate, and aging population. Although several administrations have noticed and been trying to solve this dilemma through campaigns that encourage women to work and to have more children in the meantime, it appears to be demanding and incompatible with each other, thus yielding disappointing outcomes. Furthermore, they neglected the environment of the very policymaker themselves, who possess the power to influence the people and set good examples for them to follow. Only to experience the benefits, or flaws, of the parental leave system first, the Diet can then construct bills and advice that are suitable for the people. While there is still a long way to go, there are many positive signs in the Diet that provided momentum for changes in the whole country. Diet members are public servants, but they also have their own families and personal lives. Their kids are the same as all the kids in the world who deserve a happy childhood with both parents by their sides. Adapting the two suggested policies will help ease some possible public dissatisfaction on the parental leave system for the LH and UH members, yet this shouldn't be a big concern for the policymakers. People understand that government officials are not machines. At the end of the day when one opens the front door, it doesn't matter if one is a PM, a Senator, a manager, or a truck driver. To the kids, he is just a caring father, and she is just a loving mother.