

Prospects for the New Policy to Increase Childcare Leave for Men (Survey Results)

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1. Why Consider Childcare Leave for Men?

(1) Decrease in Fertility Among Married Couples

The long-term decrease in number of children shows no signs of slowing in Japan. This trend has been attributed to the increase in persons choosing to remain single or marry later in life, with married couples generally assumed to have two children. However, new demographic data released in January indicates that another phenomenon may also be at work—the declining fertility rate among married couples.

In response, this September the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare released its *Plus One Proposal to End the Low Birthrate*, with "Plus One" being an encouragement for married couples to have one more child. The policy reviews overall work practices including those of men, and in particular aims to increase the childcare leave participation rate among men to 10% in the next three years. Given the present rate of 0.55% (*FY 1999 Basic Survey on Employment Management of Working Women*, former Ministry of Labor), this represents a 20-fold increase.

(2) Limitations of Policies Focused on Women

Since having children is a prerequisite for taking childcare leave, encouraging the use of childcare leave will not cause the birthrate to rise. Thus what does the policy hope to achieve with childcare leave for men from the viewpoint of addressing the declining birthrate of married couples?

According to the *11th National Fertility Survey* (1997) by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 29.7% of married couples with working wives have no children even after five to nine years of marriage; in densely populated areas, this proportion rises to 37%. Thus the fertility rate of married couples is low, particularly among working couples in densely populated areas.

Until now, policies addressing the decline in number of children have focused on enabling women to perform their roles at both work and home. Women have been responsible for performing housework and childcare, working shorter hours than men. However, in view of the decline in birthrate among working couples, policymakers came to realize the limitations of an approach that focuses only on women.

Thus the new policy approach aims to create a work environment in which men can also participate in housework and childcare. The focus on childcare leave for men is based on two considerations: (1) altering the perception of childcare as being solely the responsibility of women, and (2) raising the expectation that if men participate in childcare and housework from early on after childbirth, they will continue doing so later while working.

This paper analyzes the results of a survey commissioned by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, and discusses factors behind the low childcare leave participation rate among men, and prospects for increasing the rate in the future.¹

2. Why Men Don't Take Childcare Leave

We examine the low childcare leave participation rate of men from three perspectives: men's awareness and attitudes, allocation of time and income between husband and wife, and workplace factors.

(1) Status of Childcare Leave Participation

Looking first at childcare leave for the youngest child of married couples, the participation rate for women is 60.2%, compared to only 3.2% for men (Figure 1).

A large discrepancy also exists in the duration of childcare leave: women tend to take from eight months to one year (37.0%), while most men take less than one month (68.8%; Figure 2). Thus not only do men take childcare leave less often, they take shorter ones.

¹ NLI Research Institute was commissioned by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare to conduct the *Survey of Childcare Leave*. We surveyed both companies and individuals; this paper presents an analysis of the individual survey.

Respondents are nationwide monitors registered with MyVoice Communications, Inc., a web-based survey company. Respondents satisfy the following conditions: they are employed men or women, or non-working women, age 20-39, who have a child under age 6 and a spouse. Since the survey is web-based, the occupational composition tends to be biased toward specialized and administrative positions.

Figure 1 Childcare Leave Participation Rate for Youngest Child

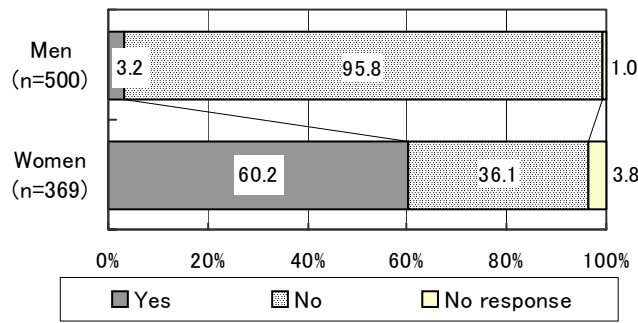
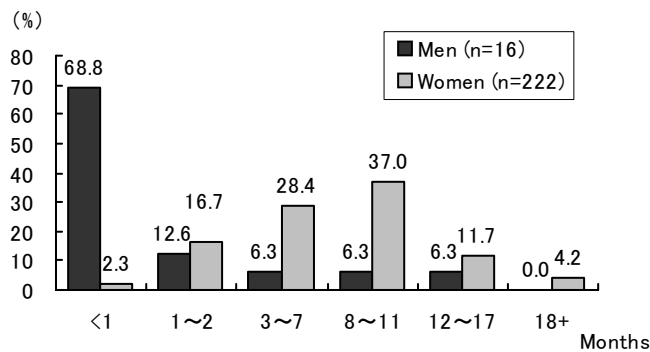


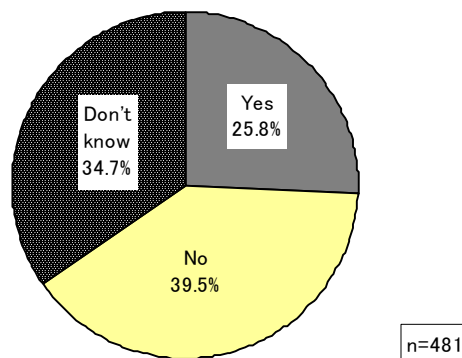
Figure 2 Duration of Childcare Leave



(2) Men's Awareness of Childcare Leave

Regarding why men do not take childcare leave, the first reason that comes to mind is that men probably feel prohibited from doing so. Thus we asked men whether they could have taken advantage of the employer's childcare leave policy had they chosen to do so. As expected, only 25.8% said yes. The most frequent response was "no" (39.5%), followed by "don't know" (34.7%; Figure 3).

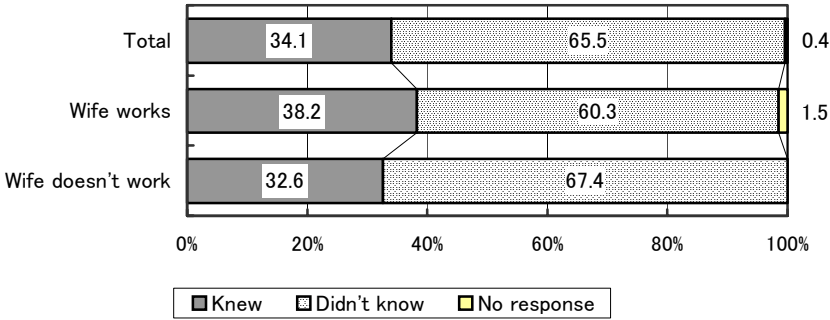
Figure 3 Do You Know if Your Employer Provides Childcare Leave? (Men Who Haven't Taken Leave)



Under Japan's Childcare Leave Law, labor agreements can deny childcare leave for men if the spouse can normally take care of children on her own. According to the *FY 1999 Basic Survey on Employment Management of Working Women*, as many as 73.0% of companies adopted such a policy—which explains why so few men are aware of any childcare leave policy.

Actually, however, even if their wife is not working, men are still entitled to childcare leave for the first eight weeks after birth on the grounds that their wife is assumed unable to perform normal childcare during this period. Most men (65.5%) are unaware of this fact, particularly men whose wives do not work (Figure 4). Thus as we had expected, men's low awareness of childcare leave is the primary reason explaining their low participation rate.

Figure 4 Did You Know You Are Entitled to 8 Weeks Childcare Leave After Birth?



(3) Allocation of Time and Income Between Husband and Wife

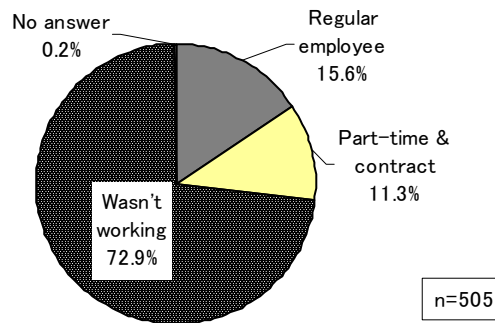
We next look at the allocation of time and income between husband and wife as a cause of the low participation rate of men.

In looking at the allocation of time spent on childcare between husband and wife, our first consideration is the wife's work status at the time of childbirth. Obviously, if the wife does not work and can devote her undivided attention to childcare, the husband has less need to take childcare leave. Media reports of men who have taken childcare leave indicate that most have wives who work full time.

With regard to the wife's work status at the time of the youngest child's birth, only 15.6% of men said their wives were working full time (regular employees), while almost three-fourths (72.9%) of the wives were not working (Figure 5). This is confirmed by the August 2001 *Special Survey of the Labor Force Survey* (Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Post and Telecommunications), which found that 71.6% of employed men with a spouse and youngest child age 0-3 had non-working spouses. Although the labor force participation rate of women has risen recently, over 70% of women with young children still do not work. This

is a major factor behind the low men's childcare leave participation rate.

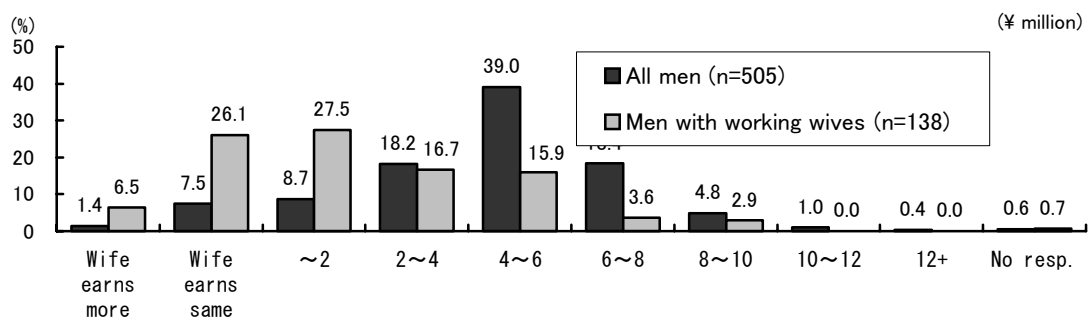
Figure 5 Wife's Work Status at Birth of Youngest Child



As for the allocation of income between husband and wife, under employment insurance, childcare leave benefits provide an income guarantee equivalent to 40% of earned income prior to leave (30% is paid during leave, 10% after returning to work). Thus the economically rational choice is for the spouse with a lower income to take childcare leave. Generally, for working couples, this means that women tend to take the leave because they earn less.

We found that among working couples, only 32.6% have a wife who earns more (6.5%) or the same (26.1%) as the husband (Figure 6). Given household budget considerations, this means that for approximately 70% of working couples, the wife should take childcare leave. Moreover, in over 90% of all couples including single-income couples, the husband earns more than the wife. This is another major factor behind the low participation rate of men.

Figure 6 Income Gap Between Husband and Wife (Husband – Wife)



(4) Workplace Conditions

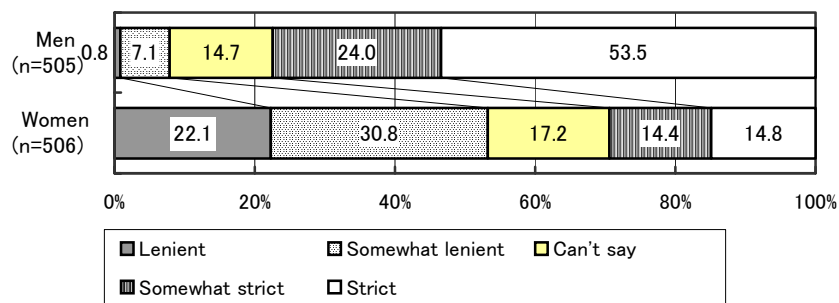
While the need for childcare leave differs depending on family circumstances, the ability to actually take a leave depends heavily on conditions in the workplace.

According to our results, while men tend to put in more work hours per week than women,

the desire for childcare leave and actual participation are unrelated to work hours for both men and women. One factor that appears to matter is the number of employees at the workplace: as the number of employees increases, childcare leave increases for women, but not for men.

As for the workplace atmosphere regarding childcare leave, over half of the women feel little difficulty obtaining a leave, while as many as 53.3% of men find it very difficult to do so (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Workplace Atmosphere Toward Childcare Leave



(5) Summary of Results

From our three-part analysis—men’s awareness, time and income allocation between husband and wife, and workplace conditions—the low childcare leave participation rate among men can be attributed to five factors.

1. Many men think they cannot take childcare leave.
2. Many men can take childcare leave only for a limited period.
3. Since the wife cares for children, the husband does not need childcare leave.
4. Since the husband earns more, his taking childcare leave affects family finances.
5. In many workplaces, men have difficulty taking childcare leave.

3. Will Men Take More Childcare Leave in the Future?

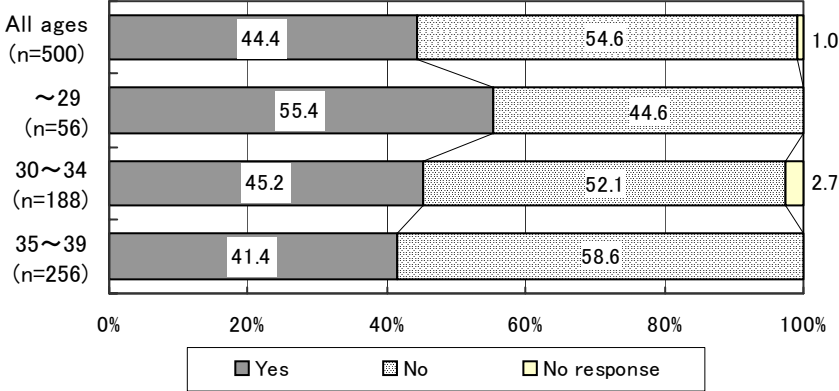
Looking ahead, will childcare leave for men remain the exceptional case, or move more into the mainstream? We analyzed the individual factors and workplace factors, and studied the possibility whether the men’s participation rate would rise in the future.

(1) Men’s Awareness

When considering the possible increase in men’s participation rate, the most important point is whether men feel they should take childcare leave in the first place.

Asked whether they wished to take childcare leave when their youngest child was born, 44.4% of men responded affirmatively (Figure 8). Approximately half would have taken a leave had conditions been right. In particular, the desire for childcare leave increases with youth, with 55.4% of men in their 20s wanting to do so. This is a good sign that the participation rate could rise in the future.

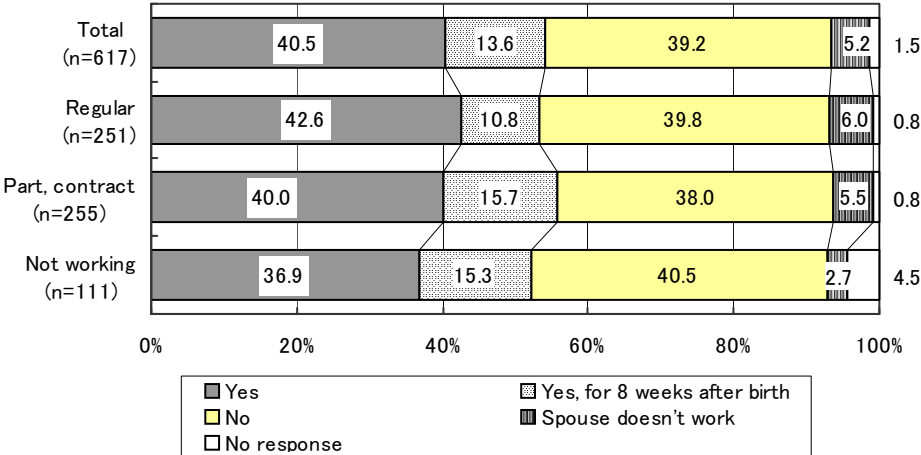
Figure 8 Men Who Want to Take Childcare Leave



(2) Wife’s Desire for Husband to Take Childcare Leave

When we asked women whether they want their husband to take childcare leave, 40.5% responded affirmatively; this proportion rises to over half (54.1%) if we include the women who want childcare leave for their husband eight weeks after birth (13.6%). The proportion varies slightly depending on the wife’s work status, but not by much (Figure 9). Thus even if the wife does not work, the demand for childcare leave for the husband is not necessarily low.

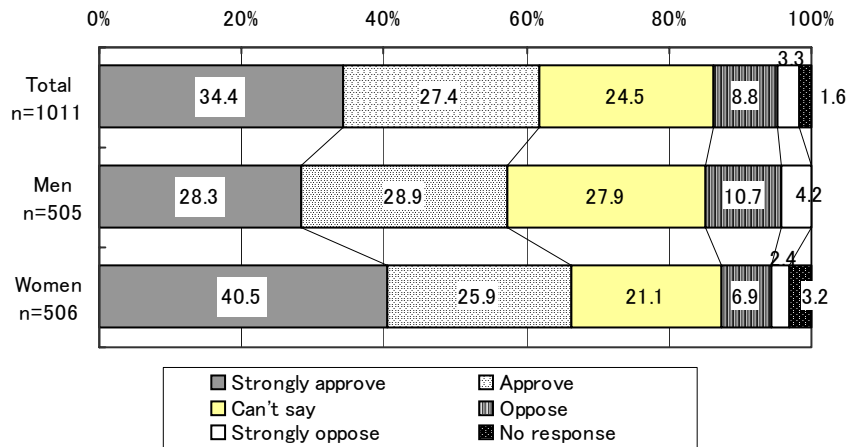
Figure 9 Wife’s Desire for Husband to Take Childcare Leave (by Wife’s Work Status)



(3) Attitude Toward Coworkers Taking Childcare Leave

Over 60% of the men approve of childcare leave for coworkers, including those who approve strongly (34.4%) or slightly (27.4%). In particular, approval is greater among women. Since our survey is limited to persons with infant children, these results may be slightly biased upward; still, we found that only 3.3% strongly disapprove. Thus the general consensus appears to be favorable toward coworkers taking childcare leave (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Approval of Childcare Leave for Male Coworkers



(4) Impact of a 1-2 Month Childcare Leave

As described earlier, if the wife is not working or is taking childcare leave, the husband in many cases can take only one to two months of childcare leave. In practice, the leave that most men take is quite short (Figure 3). We next examine the possibility of men taking a short-term childcare leave of one to two months.

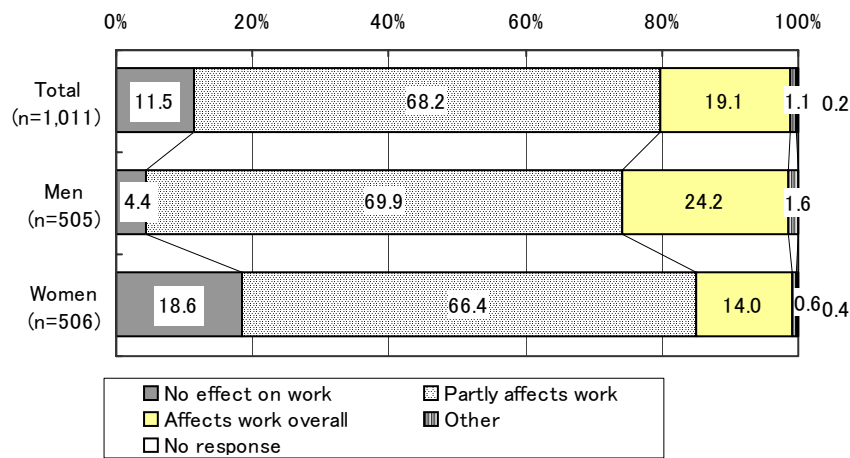
First, we asked what impact a coworker’s childcare leave of one to two months would have on work. A large proportion (68.2%) predicts that some work will be affected. This may be inevitable depending on when the leave is taken and other factors. But more interesting is the result that only 19.1% predict an impact on work overall (Figure 11).

Moreover, of the 16 respondents who actually took childcare leave, all 12 with less than two months’ leave had no complaints regarding their treatment by the personnel department.

Based on the above results, a one to two month leave appears to have no significant impact on either the person concerned or on coworkers. Of course, we also found that approximately half of the male respondents did not want to take childcare leave (Figure 8), while some women feel that childcare leave for husbands serves no purpose. Thus childcare leave for men is not likely to become a mainstream phenomenon in the near future. Still, we can hope that more men take short-term leaves in the future. But first, more men will have to learn

about the eight-week leave they are entitled to after childbirth.

Figure 11 Expected Impact of 1-2 Month Childcare Leave by Coworker



4. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the causes of the low childcare leave participation rate among men, and discussed the possibility for an increase in the future. As mentioned earlier, increased childcare leave participation will not directly affect the declining birthrate. But if more young couples demand childcare leave, and if childcare leave takes root in society as an acceptable practice, the society's atmosphere will shift to one that encourages people to have more children.

Our survey made the following significant findings: (1) many men want to take childcare leave, (2) younger persons in particular want to take childcare leave, (3) the desire for childcare leave exists even if the wife does not work, and (4) people generally approve of childcare leave for male coworkers.

The objectives and methods of childcare leave can become quite varied depending on family circumstances. For a family with a non-working wife, the husband may prefer a longer paid vacation time to a long-term leave. For working couples, some may prefer to take a six-month leave in turn, while others may prefer to resort to childcare facilities that accept infants.

How best can we allocate the responsibilities of infant care between husband and wife, and between family and facility? Moreover, will the desired alternatives become available in Japanese society? These will become important issues in the future.