FEATURE: Women's silent resistance behind falling birthrate

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"The trend toward fewer children is women's silent resistance against a society that does not allow them to give birth to babies in peace," says Rieko Suzuki of the Dentsu Institute for Human Studies.

Suzuki, 45, is a specialist on security issues but has also written on Japan's declining birthrate with a book entitled "Shoshika-Kiki ni Tatsu Nippon Shakai" (Trend Toward a Decline in the Number of Children -- Japanese Society in Crisis).

The average number of babies born to a Japanese woman throughout her lifetime set a new low of 1.34 in 1999, breaking the previous record of 1.38 set the year before, according to the Health and Welfare Ministry.

The number of babies born in 1999 totaled 1,177,663, down 25,484 from 1998 and dropping below the 1,187,064 recorded in 1995, the previous record low since the government started compiling population statistics in 1899.

Although a law for child-care leave has been in force for more than nine years, growing numbers of women continue to work. At the same time, however, some find themselves forced to give up their jobs to care for their children.

Izumi Momose, 40, resigned from a manufacturing company in 1997 three years after she delivered a baby boy. She became weary of excusing herself from work at 4 p.m. to look after her infant and felt uncomfortable about not being able to do overtime or work on holidays.

Suzuki said women know they face a hard time once they become mothers as many will have to cope with both their jobs and raising children as well as household chores and a loss of free time.

It is extremely difficult for women to find high-earning spouses who are also willing to help out in the house, Suzuki said.

A continued decline in the birthrate will erode the size of the work force and lower living standards in general, she said.

Japan must look at the long working hours many employees put in and work out how to bring about a society in which men and women can rear their children while keeping their jobs, she warned.

Mizuho Fukushima, 44, believes there is a big gap in awareness between older male Diet members and women in the child-rearing age group about the falling birth rate.

Currently serving her first six-year term as a member of the House of Councillors, the 44-year-old said some male legislators have expressed indignation at a Health and Welfare Ministry poster that says a man who refuses to take part in child rearing should not be called a father.

Fukushima, a lawyer by profession, said some male colleagues unabashedly say the declining birthrate is the result of women going to university.

Instead, the problem is that society places too much of the burden of child rearing on women, said Fukushima, who has a daughter in third grade at middle school.

"It is a matter of course for anyone to take child rearing upon themselves but men are avoiding it by making an excuse out of being busy at work," said Tateo Hoshi, 51, who was a male nurse at child-care centers for about 20 years. He is the secretary general of a 250-member men's group studying child-care issues.

Masahira Yamada, a 42-year-old assistant professor of family sociology at Tokyo Gakugei University, says the fall in the birthrate can be stemmed by establishing a more pleasant working environment for women.

"The number of people giving birth to babies will rise if they can rear children while working," he said.

Yamada, author of the book "Parasaito Shinguru no Jidai" (The Age of Parasite Singles), says the increasing number of young people staying on in their parents' homes is one factor behind the declining birthrate.

Yamada said husbands should start a movement calling on their wives not to expect to be supported.

"The husband's objective in life was to work for his family," the professor said. "He continued working silently even while his wife held the purse strings of their family and enjoyed her hobbies."

He said the idea that the purpose of life is affluent consumption has become a thing of the past but that some women still seek "consumption and..."
material culture” as full-time homemakers.

Unless they break away from such a notion, he said, Japan will not be able to reverse the declining birthrate.

Poetess Machi Tawara, 37, said she is willing to become a single mother. She has candidly expressed her view that there should be a variety of types of family to a meeting of a subcommittee of the Education Ministry’s advisory panel the Central Council for Education.

Noting that Japan has a low percentage of children born out of wedlock but an extremely high incidence of abortions, the former high school teacher said such a phenomenon is due to society's refusal to recognize child rearing by single mothers.

The question of motherhood is none of the state’s or society’s business, she said.

"The only thing the state can do is to change the environment so that those who want to give birth to children can deliver them."

“What is being sought today, I think, is (people’s) feeling that the society as a whole should care for children,” Tawara said.

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