Is Japan a Gender Equal Society?

One day, I was really shocked to find news that Japan is a developing country in terms of gender equality. I had been thinking that Japan is a gender equal country somewhat. Yet, that news says Japan is far from being a gender equal country compared to other societies. How we think about men and women's role is connected to our culture and society, so it is no doubt that there are different views in different societies toward gender roles. While 57.3 percent of Japanese women do not think 'husband should work and wife should stay at home', 93.2 percent of Swedish women do not think so (Japan Times, 2003). Why there is such a big difference between Japan and Sweden? In this essay, I would like to compare how Japanese and Swedish people think about gender roles and explain why they think so. I will also introduce interesting changes about gender roles that you may find around you in the near future in Japan.

When we look around the world, Scandinavian countries are said to be the most supportive countries in terms of social security. According to the Gender Equality Bureau, 43.3 percent of Japanese men do not agree that 'The husband should work and the wife should stay at home'. On the other hand, 88.2 percent of Swedish men do not agree with that idea (Gender Equality Bureau, 2007). This disagreement is about twice the number of Japanese men's disagreement. The reason is connected to our tradition and culture. In the past, men had dominated daily life for a long time in Japan, and those traditional gender role stereotypes still remain deeply. It seems difficult to change our views toward gender roles now. However these days, many women are trying to pursue their dreams and to work outside of home. Our style of life is changing so that we should throw away those old-fashioned ideas about gender roles.

As women's advancement in the society progresses, they face many worries about balancing families and careers. Child-rearing is an enormous problem and burden for women (Japan Times, 2003). While 56.4 percent of Japanese women take maternity leave, only 0.4 percent of men
take it. What is more, during child-rearing period, Japanese husbands spend 48 minutes a day doing household work while European and American husbands spend 3 hours on it a day (Japan Times, 2003). I have never heard of men in Japan who I know taking maternity leave. I believe many people know men could take paternity leave as well, but because we do not know someone who took it before, we have no idea how men would be treated when they return to work after paternity leave. Considering this, I suppose taking paternity leave has too many risks for men who are expected to take care of their families financially by working outside of the home.

Most young people's experience of traditional family gender roles is based on their own families. When I carefully thought about traditional gender roles, I reflected on my own family. I believe most Japanese people are the same as my situation. I grew up in the circumstance of gender inequality. My father has an old-fashioned idea that men should not need to do housework. He feels that those chores are women's job even though my mother works outside like my father does. My father might wants to help my mother, but because he grew up in the situation where the only thing men need to do is work outside, he does not know how to help her. As we see from that point, 'the husband should work and the wife should stay at home' idea came from our traditional family style. It seems this idea allows many men to believe that they do not need to do household work or to help women at home.

Yet, there is a new and interesting trend that will surely change people's views about stereotyped gender roles. It is called 'at-home-dad' (Japan Times, data unknown). A short time ago, there was a TV show about at-home-dads and also a book about them. Both of them are very famous so househusbands are less rejected as strange or unusual compared to the past. What is more, many men started to question their way of life. They make sure their life, whether just graduating from a good university, being promoted by a big company and taking care of their family financially, is happy or not. They began to re-evaluate their whole way of living. One reason why
men started to doubt their life could be related to the changing life style of women. Or, some people started to be househusbands because of economic restructuring of their workplaces outside the home. Restructuring is no longer a fiction or something restricted to a minority. Generally, there are still few at-home-dads so that they feel socially isolated. But in this coming era, as the views toward gender roles change and many people started to think their lives again, being househusbands should be usual in the near future.

To conclude, we form how we think about gender roles unconsciously through the influence of our tradition, society and own family. Even though it is time for women to go outside of the home and pursue their dream, it is still really difficult to change men and women's present roles in Japan. Yet, there are some changes that will help Japanese women to do what they really want to do with balancing their dream and family in the near future. Men started to consider their way of life carefully and some men became at-home-dads. This was thought to be unusual in the past. It might not be still easy for both men and women to have a wide view of choosing how they can live without caring about traditional gender roles now. However, I hope that Japanese society will reach the level of Sweden by the time I work. I do not want to waste my time or other women to waste their time because of who we are or which gender we have.

(1023 words)

References

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