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**“What is needed is a different way of thinking about employees—not as workers only but as people with complicated lives for whom employment is a critical, but not the only, activity—and an acceptance of the necessary link between their private lives and the work of the organization ”**

**Lotte Bailyn, 1993:3**

**Globalization and Work/Life Balance: Gendered Implications of New Initiatives at a U.S. Multinational in Japan**

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**Introduction**

For the past year and a half, I have been engaged in research on the implementation of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) among white-collar workers at a large-scale US multinational financial services corporation in Tokyo, Japan, which I shall call MNF<sup>1</sup>. MNF has a long history in Japan, having established its first

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<sup>1</sup> I began research at MNF Japan in 1999 after learning that it was about to pilot flexible work arrangements. I was successful in obtaining an exploratory grant for the project in an international grant competition. The research consists of soliciting interviews from top managers, mid-managers, and employees who are interested in taking, who are taking, or who in the past have taken, flexible work arrangements of some sort. I have also interviewed some who resigned from the corporation after having made use of a FWA. Interviews are thematic and open-ended, intended to elicit employees' views of the current work environment, their strategies for work/life balance, their response to corporate initiatives, and so on. Working closely with me and wearing two hats is a vice-president of personnel, whose job it is to implement the FWA initiatives. She is also a doctoral candidate, specializing in human development and cross-cultural communication. She acts as my research assistant, and is often, although not always, present and involved in interviewing; many of the mid-managerial interviews were conducted by her alone. From MNF's perspective, her role is as a “change agent” and this research is “action research.” From my perspective, I have free rein over the interview content

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office in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over 95% of its employees in Japan are Japanese. Currently the firm has operations in numerous countries world wide, with thousands of workers. MNF is one of tens of US financial services firms in Japan's market. This research is still ongoing, and any conclusions I reach in this paper are tentative. In this presentation, I seek first to introduce the concept of work/life policy as it was formulated in the U.S. Next I will briefly discuss the Japanese cultural environment for work, the state's social policy framework, and how these "fit" with the notion of balancing work and life across gender. Last I will discuss the corporation's stake in this endeavor, and what workers' responses reveal about MNF's initiatives to date.

### **Background, I: Work/Life Policy in the U.S.**

In the past two decades, the United States has seen increasing variegation and complexity in family patterns. While U.S. culture was never fully represented by the breadwinner father, the homemaker mother and two children, it is ever less so (Coontz,1993). More importantly, we have seen a paradigmatic shift in which we recognize the legitimacy of women's role in the workplace throughout their lifecourse, regardless of marital status.

As the US moves away from the gendered male breadwinner/female homemaker division of labor , we encounter an increasing number of parents in the

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and analysis, I benefit tremendously from the perspective of someone whose knowledge of the company is deep and far-reaching, and I am able to learn a great deal about how workers are actually coping with work and life,. Complementing the interviews is my ongoing study of Japan's governmental policy environment regarding population and labor (1996-), my interviews in 1997 with women who sought employment after a period of child-rearing , and my previous study of female blue-collar workers at a Japanese manufacturer in the early 1980s (see Roberts, 1994, *Staying on the Line: Blue-Collar Women in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: Univeristy of Hawaii Press). By now the FWA programs are well underway, and we have interviewed 16 top managers, 30 managers, 9 staff on reduced hours, 6 who have recently taken maternity leave and/or childcare leave, 4 interested in taking MCL or CCL, 11 working mothers, 9 employees taking reduced hours, and 10 resigners, as well as held two focus group with working mothers and one with working fathers.

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workplace who have sole or shared responsibilities for dependents, be they children, disabled family members, or elderly family members. Indeed, the labor force participation rate of married women with children under the age of six climbed from 18.6% in 1960 to 30.3% in 1970 and 63.5% in 1995 (Blau,1998:117).

Recognition of the difficulties workers have in dealing with life-course related events, be they maternity and childbirth or care for infirm dependents, led the U.S. government to pass the Family Medical Leave Act in 1993 (Blau,1996;Ruhm and Teague, 1997).

Some corporations have come to realize that in this new social environment, rigid and rule-bound work schedules invite problems of absenteeism and lowered productivity. In response to this, from about the 1980s there has been an increase in policies, known as "work/family friendly policies" or "work/life policies," to give employees more discretion over their work schedules. Among them are reduced hours for regular workers, telecommuting, flex-time, compressed work-week, family leave and job-sharing. Research on U.S. corporations with work/life policies has shown employees' use of such policies leads to more satisfied, more productive and more dedicated workers. Such policies are said to improve worker retention, and also act as a way to attract recruits to the firm (Rapoport, Bailyn, Kolb and Fletcher, 1998, Bailyn, Fletcher and Kolb, 1997).

While work/life policies may sound like a panacea for workers' problems in the postmodern age, researchers have found many difficulties at the implementation stages. Prime among them are informal, unspoken "rules" of work culture that see as slacking anything less than 100% effort, made visible by one's presence at the company (what Perlow [1997] refers to as "face-time"). When employees make use of flexible work arrangements they may be taken off the promotion track, and indeed their jobs themselves may be endangered (Perlow, 1997). Hence, workers are reluctant to make use of the policies, lest they be branded as disloyal for lacking commitment to the firm. Managers, for their part, hesitate to grant use of the policies for a variety of reasons. Among them are disbelief that such policies could really improve productivity, fear of being seen as a patron (the "fairness" issue), fear of loss of control, and anxiety over headcount (Bailyn, 1993, Perlow, 1997).

Why are these policies so tough to implement? Fletcher and Bailyn point to the cultural view that family is adversarial to the needs of work as the fundamental problem, what they identify as the "last boundary" of a new "boundaryless" way of doing business. That is, whereas the business world

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recognizes the value in bridging barriers between various boundaries that had previously been kept distinct, such as those between marketing, engineering, and R&D, it has yet to realize the necessity of questioning the barrier between work and family (Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996:256). In my reading of them, Fletcher and Bailyn are not advocating that work life envelope private life, but that concerns in one's private life have a legitimate place in influencing one's work schedule, that one's life apart from work should have an above-board presence. This last boundary between public and private, work and family, oft goes unchallenged, by corporations, managers, and by workers.

### **Background, II: The Culture of Work in Japan**

Unlike U.S. workplaces, Japanese workplaces have not undergone either the revolution in the gender role paradigm or the variegation in family patterns discussed above. Although women have steadily increased their labor force participation in the past four decades, and while it has become commonplace for married Japanese women to re-enter the workforce after their children are of school age, their re-entry is usually restricted to part-time work. The post-war pattern in large corporations has been that employers allot the stable "regular" jobs to men, the "corporate warriors" and from them they expect total commitment, expressed in long hours of work and loyalty to the firm. Women, because they are viewed by employers as ephemeral and peripheral employees, are not generally expected nor encouraged to remain in the workplace for the span of their careers. Rather, they take on the entire responsibility for managing the home, their children's educations, and the health of their families (Lock, 1996; Osawa, 1994; Roberts, 1994, 1996). This gendered division of labor, together with other socio-institutional frames (education, tax system, social welfare system, legislation) that support large corporations, has been termed the "corporate centered society" (*kigyō chuushin shakai*) (Osawa, 1993). Gordon (1998:56) notes,

"Workplaces in large private corporations eventually became citadels of Japan's corporate-centered society. The ascendance of the institutions of capitalism was common to many parts of the globe by the 1950s and 1960s, in particular Western Europe and North America, but in the long run, for better and for worse, the Japanese version has proved unusually total and durable."

In fact, Japan was the only post-industrial nation where we saw no correlation between higher educational status and attachment to work for women: holding a college degree does not necessarily mean commitment to a career

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(Brinton, 1993, Tsuya and Mason, 1992).

While the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1986 did result in some corporations allowing a few women to become female corporate warriors, it did nothing to change the baseline masculine standard of the "regular employee" job, which requires the counterpart of a "professional housewife" to make family life possible. Because of the incompatibilities of career and home life in Japan, many Japanese women reject this "corporate warrior" model, and put more emphasis on their roles as mothers, homemakers, and community activists, in which they have considerable authority and for which they garner a strong measure of cultural respect (Lebra, 1984; Iwao, 1993; LeBlanc, 1999). At the same time, however, Japan's increasingly highly educated young women are demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the status quo, by delaying marriage or eschewing it altogether. An example of this can be seen in the MNF employee statistics: MNF Japan is composed of over 1,500 employees, about 60% women. The norm for marriage among male employees appears very strong, with 75% of men aged 31-40, 90% of men aged 41-50, and 96% of men aged 51-60, married. For women, marriage is less prevalent: only 37% aged 31-50, and 27% aged 51-60, are married. The women's marriage rate is markedly lower than that for Japanese women in general. One could infer that for a man, a career without a spouse is a challenge, while the opposite is true for a woman.

### **Work/Life Policy and the Japanese State**

The strategic role of the Japanese state in coordinating industrial strategy such that Japan achieved global success in challenging European and American domination has been much discussed in the literature on the political economy and society of Japan (Johnson, 1982, Hamada, 1991, Waters, 1995). This coordination reached to the domestic realm as well. Gordon (1998:54) argues that in 1955, the Japanese government sponsored a campaign called "The New Life Movement," whereby "Women were to run "rational" and "efficient" homes, and this would allow men to realize the same ideal at work. By playing these complementary roles, women and men were expected to raise productivity and bring prosperity to all." This sort of coordination, termed "social management" by Garon (1997), can be seen clearly in the Ministry of Labor's current efforts to change the workplace to one that is more "family friendly."

Waters, in discussing globalization, asserts:

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"In seeking to develop strong cultures, firms become receptive to ideas and seek them out. Global flows of business ideas have therefore increased very rapidly. This provides the second effect which is that the very act of looking outside the company and outside the nation for ideas encourages a consciousness of global events and consequences" (1995: 85).

Indeed, Japan has been looking outside the nation to take the best from Western technology "*wakonyosai*" (Japanese ethics, Western skills) for well over a century, and has also done her share of globalizing Western manufacturing processes. Furthermore, global flows of another kind, what Waters refers to as cultural globalization, inevitably accompany technological globalization and affect cultural practices and hence, lifestyles.

One could argue that the legal frameworks the Japanese state has established since 1986 aimed at creating equal opportunity for men and women in the society are an example of cultural globalization. While the impetus of the initial Equal Opportunity Employment Law (EEO) came substantially from foreign pressure "*gaiatsu*" (Hanami, 2000; Bishop, 2000), I and others have argued that there is also significant indigenous demand for creating a legal and social infrastructure supportive of gender equality (Roberts, 1999). In brief, in recent years, women have "voted with their feet" by ever-increasingly late marriage, due mainly to reluctance to assume the burdens marriage entails. This in turn has caused a steady decline in the total fertility rate of the nation, now at 1.34.<sup>2</sup> The government, heeding this trend with alarm, is strategically beginning to foster the development of "family friendly" and gender bias-free workplaces in order to try to convince young people that marriage does not mean that a woman must lose her career goals and quit her job to raise a family. In large part in Japan, the impetus for "family friendly" and "gender-equal" workplaces, then, springs from population policy of a state that is anxious about a future (2050) where one worker will have to support two elderly pensioners.

The most salient recent laws include:

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<sup>2</sup> Women have also been leaving the country to seek careers abroad. According to the Japan Times, in 1999 the number of Japanese women living abroad (402,500) exceeded that of men (393,200) for the first time since 1976 when the first such survey was taken. The article quotes an official of the Foreign Ministry's Consular and Migration Affairs Department as saying, "In the past, most Japanese women (living abroad) were accompanying their husbands on overseas assignment, but now there is a growing number of women who go overseas alone for work" (Japan Times 21 May, 2000; "Expats

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[overhead]

\***The Childcare/Family Care Leave Law** (1999) Childcare leave (CCL) was established in 1992 and Family Care followed in 1999. CCL allows a one-year childcare leave after childbirth for mother or father or shared; 25% of salary is paid by social insurance (to be raised to 40% in 2001). Family Care Leave (FCL) allows three-months unpaid leave to care for family members in need of care.

\***The Basic Law for a Gender -Equal Society** (1999): The law obliges the government (including local self-governing bodies) to devise a "basic plan for a gender-equal society." Furthermore requires the government to establish a procedure for handling complaints concerning its measures to establish a gender-equal society and to aid those whose human rights are violated (JIL, 9/1999: 4).

\***Revised EEO L** (enacted in 6/97; enforced, 4/99: prohibits employment discrimination against women workers, provides for settlement of disputes, punishes corporations that violate the law (by publishing their names), provides measures against sexual harassment).

\***Revised Child Welfare Law** (1997): rendered parents clients with "choice" in daycare services, rendered local governments as service providers; required daycare centers to respond to the childcare concerns of people in the locale; altered fee scales to reflect varied costs depending on age level of children; raised the position of after-school care programs.

The Labor Ministry and the Ministry of Health and Welfare keep very well informed about US and European nations' policies and corporate practices regarding gender equality, employment and child welfare. In fact, in June of 2000, twenty employees of the Japan Institute of Workers Evolution, an organization that undertakes contract work from the MOL, went on a study tour of the top ten firms on the "Best 100" list of *Working Mothers* magazine (interview at the JIWE, 10/18/2000).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the Ministry of Labor recently sponsored an

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hit record high; women outnumber men."

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps here we should ask the question: Why the USA? Why is Japan so interested in US corporate policy initiatives on flexible work and "family friendly" arrangements? Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address this question, the answer may be three-fold: First, Japan is trying not to develop a strong welfare state approach to childcare and elder care but to encourage privatization of

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international symposium entitled "Thinking about Family and Firms in the Age of a Low Birthrate," to which they invited specialists on flexible work arrangements and family policy from France, the US, Great Britain, Sweden, and Japan to present their ideas on ways to "harmonize" work and family life.<sup>4</sup>

### **Synergy between the State and the Corporation**

There is a synergistic effect between corporate initiatives and governmental initiatives in Japan, and this synergy is both intentional and coincidental.

It is *intentional* in at least three ways: first, the MOL has created linkages between itself and corporations it considers to be "family friendly," both Japanese and multinational, and asks these firms to cooperate in mentoring other firms that have yet to establish such policies. For instance, the Ministry of Labor, in its efforts toward "administrative guidance",<sup>5</sup> recently asked the American multinational firm I am studying to host a meeting with three small-to-medium sized Japanese firms from the city of Nagoya, to brief them on the sorts of policies it has established regarding childcare and family care leave, reduced hours for regular workers, and so on. None of these smaller firms had any such policies in place. What they really wanted advice on, however, was not how to implement the more elaborate flexible work arrangements, but simply how to get their employees to use their vacation days. This speaks worlds to the nature of the current recession work environment in Japan, wherein hours tend to be long, and people are not taking

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such services; second, the work environments in the two countries have some compelling similarities (both have longer work hours and fewer holidays as compared with the OECD countries), and third, firms in the US have been experimenting with "work/life" policies for over a decade now.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, and, I think, against the Ministry of Labor's intent, the representative from Japan, a corporate executive from Kikkoman corporation, expressed the opinion that while his company had established childcare leave in the early 1980s along with other programs to help women maintain their employment, he himself thinks that a child needs its *mother* for "skinship" (close skin contact) during the first year of life, so encouraging fathers to take CCL is not necessarily a good idea. He backed up his opinion by citing a recent popular psychology book by a Japanese psychologist.

<sup>5</sup> Hanami Tadashi (Jan. 1, 2000:9, Japan Labor Bulletin) argues that ". . .the Japanese way of administrative guidance with advice, suggestions, recommendations, consultation and persuasion—including through implication and bestowal of favor and disfavor—could be to some extent effective in implementing a policy goal. . .However, such a method of enforcing policy goals very much depends on voluntary compliance by companies, and does not work for those companies unwilling to change long-held prejudices."



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even their fully allotted time off.<sup>6</sup>

**Second** in the government-corporate link is the practice of requesting that employees from private enterprises be seconded to government-related offices for periods of two years or so in order to create networks between government and business, and to foster co-knowledge and cooperation between the sectors.<sup>7</sup>

**Third**, so-designated “Family Friendly Firms” are given awards by the MOL and are advertised at national symposia, in newspapers and other media. Hence, their profile is raised and the notion that the government is interested in having all firms follow suit becomes commonplace. While this is not a speedy means to full compliance, it does give people in firms that do not comply a slightly better footing on which to legitimately argue—whether through the union or through other means-- that the firm ought to be a good “corporate citizen” and comply with the law.

In sum, while the state sees “family friendly policies” as a necessary population policy measure, most firms are not eager to embrace them and have no strong business reason to do so in the current recession economy. In fact, the recession is aggravating the already long-hours of work with “service” overtime, and holiday-taking is down. Since the legal framework is deliberately weak, firms can ignore it with relative impunity.

I mentioned above that “family friendly” initiatives are also **coincidental**. To

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Nikkei Weekly, people at small firms (30-99 employees) took only 7 vacation days in 1999, less than half of their allotted (16) days. This is down 1.3% from the previous year, and follows the trend of decreasing rates of taking holiday since 1995. They owe the trend to corporate restructuring during recession: “A ministry official attributed the decline in the execution rate mainly to the fact that even though paid holidays have increased, workers cannot take them at their won discretion as the number of workers at plants and offices is decreasing due to corporate restructuring” (23 October 2000:17).

<sup>7</sup> At the Japan Institute of Worker's Evolution, for example, a managerial level employee of an American multinational is currently serving a two-year stint as department head of the Career Woman Support Section. Presumably when she returns to her company, she will have extensive first-hand knowledge of government services supporting home and work nationwide, while the foundation in which she currently serves will benefit from her expertise as a member of a firm that is known as a leader in this area. Under such arrangements, salaries are paid by hosting firms.

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explain this, let us visit another player in the "family friendly policy" camp, MNF corporation.

### **MNF Japan and the Introduction of Flexible Work Arrangements**

Unlike many Japanese firms, who have not been quick to implement the legislation I earlier mentioned, MNF has a corporate policy to the effect that it must comply with the laws of the state in which it is sited. Thus, it has offered CCL since 1992, and FCL was introduced in 1999. Furthermore, career female employees report that MNF's attitude toward women in terms of training and promotion improved during the later 1980s, when the EEOL came into effect.

In 1999, MNF decided to implement some of the flexible work arrangements (hereon FWAs) already in place in its US operations, as a pilot study, and to expand them if they proved successful. Up to this time, flex-time was the only FWA offered at MNF Japan. The firm was expanding in Japan despite the recession, and needed to both attract and retain good workers. The management expressed concerns that they had been losing some talented female staff due to their difficulties balancing work and family lives. This was especially important because MNF had been treating female and male employees on an equal basis<sup>8</sup>, and had hired many female 4-year college graduates as well as MBA holders. They had a strong interest in retaining them.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the top management decided to take action along several lines, and announce it as "Managing with Flexibility." "Reduced hours for regular staff" was billed as a new tool that managers could use

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<sup>8</sup> This is unlike the practice of many Japanese large corporations, which, in response to the EEOL, put in place dual-track systems of *ippan-shoku* (non-career) track and *sogo-shoku* (career) track, and proceeded to hire most female graduates in the non-career track. See Mori (1998) and Shire (2000:39). Shire notes, "While officially the two-track employment system should allow for the employment of qualified women in career-track roles, in 1995 only 28% of the companies with such a system actually employed women in the career track (Japan Institute of Labor 1996). Instead, a trend toward recruiting university-educated women into the non-career track became more prevalent. . . (Wakisaka 1996)."

<sup>9</sup> MNF Japan's workforce is composed of over a thousand people, with women making up just over half. The norm for marriage among male employees appears very strong, with 75% of men aged 31-40, 90% of men aged 41-50, and 96% of men 51-60 married. For women, marriage is much less prevalent: only 37% aged 31-40, 37% of those aged 41-50, and 27% aged 51-60, being married. The women's marriage rate is vastly lower than that for Japanese women in general. One could speculate that for a man, a career without a spouse is a challenge, while the opposite is true for a woman.

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to retain workers who needed shorter hours. Extended provision of Childcare Leave and the new Eldercare Leave were also announced, and it was suggested that reduced hours could be used in combination with these leaves as appropriate for the worker and worksite. In addition, a website on childcare was established, a "Bring your Child to Work Day" was institutionalized (once a year), and, most recently, a half-day vacation day policy was announced. Pilots of telecommuting will be launched in 2001. Job sharing and compressed work week have not been taken up as of now.

While some of MNF's flexible work arrangements can be termed "family friendly," the intent is not to only target people with families, but to offer more flexibility to all employees. This departs from the government discourse with its population agenda.

The top managers were willing to introduce these measures, but they also noted that there could be resistance to flexibility at the mid-managerial level, for a couple of reasons. One is that many mid-managers are head-hunted in from previous employment in Japanese firms, and they lack the mindset of the MNF culture, which tends to be oriented more toward an individual's targets and getting the job done at an intense pace during the work day. In contrast, the Japanese white-collar work culture is seen as one where the day is much longer, interspersed with socializing, and workers are not expected to leave if others in the section still have jobs to finish.

Another roadblock to implementation that top managers noted is that MNF's culture tends more toward gender equality, and managers who come in from more traditional Japanese banking environments will not be used to this and may not feel that retaining female employees is desirable. In a similar vein, MNF has recently made some acquisitions of Japanese companies that are perceived to have a very different, more conservative managerial culture as compared to MNF's. MNF Japan's top personnel manager expressed doubt as to whether these new acquisitions would be convinced of the efficacy of flexible work initiatives.

The long hours of overtime evidenced in some sectors of MNF were also seen as

strong barriers to the implementation of FWAs.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the notion of “fairness” came up. This has also been a concern in the US (Bailyn, 1993), but I would argue that it is even more strongly a concern in Japan, where social institutions (such as contracts) are less individually tailored and more vague. As I found in my study of a factory in western Japan in the 1980s, if a person's working conditions vary significantly from those of the rest of her reference group, the “unfairness” of this will be a cause for comment. Nagata (unpublished paper, 2000) points out that the Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has even coined a new phrase in recognition of this, “atarashii kouhei no gainen” (“fair disparity”). The Commission states, “We should bid farewell to equal outcomes and introduce a new concept of fairness, what we might call “fair disparity,” which appreciates performance and growth potential, accepting differences and disparities in individual abilities and talents as a given” (Prime Minister's Office, 2000:12-13).

For all the above reasons, top management took a gradual approach to implementation, especially on the reduced hours policy. For instance, the personnel vice-president whose main task is to implement these policies and explore new ones that might work, notes that she has first found success in convincing foreign managers to pilot these programs, and let Japanese managers see the positive outcomes and then become more willing to experiment with using them (Nagata, 2000:7). Perhaps this is obvious, but the corporation, especially in a multi-cultural environment, meets with a number of obstacles in trying to change the work culture. Each manager has his or her own experiences and challenges, and one training session on managing with flexibility is not sufficient to convince a person to take the risk and encourage what amounts to a very different

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<sup>10</sup> Overtime varies depending on the section and depending on one's particular job. In interviews, managers noted that one reason for long hours of overtime in some sections is the MNF environment in Japan. It is seeking to be on the forefront of new innovations in financial services, so the systems used in the work process are often being re-designed. Moreover, the regulatory environment frequently changes and they must respond immediately. Expectations of customer service are also extremely high. Last, MNF is in expansion mode and finds itself short-staffed because the headcount for the country has been set at a very tight level. Several non-Japanese top managers expressed dismay at the hours some workers put in and could not put their finger on the cause. One sector of MNF is now experimenting with paying people not to do overtime.

relationship between worker and manager, worker and team, and worker and home. Nagata notes that some Japanese managers have a visceral reaction when workplace flexibility is raised—they tense their bodies as if under assault. This leads to compliance in name only—that is, the manager's body language is enough to communicate his disapproval of a worker who desires flexible work arrangements:

“If a manager believes with every fiber of his being that all his regular employees should be in the office during the same hours and share equally in any overflow of work that requires overtime, he is likely to be physically uncomfortable administering a new reduced work hours policy that only a few people will be using. His disapproval of a woman who requests to work only 60% will be communicated to her and her colleagues so clearly, even if only nonverbally by posture, gesture, and expression, that few Japanese working in large companies will be able to withstand their own resultant discomfort and possible group ostracism” (Nagata:2000:6).

Resistance to flexible work arrangements for one's subordinates is not restricted to Japanese nationals, however. One interviewee told me that her American boss was surprised to hear that maternity leave is so long in Japan (6 weeks before and 8 weeks after birth), let alone the optional childcare leave one may request after that until the child is one year of age. He made it clear that he was not comfortable with a long leave, and she, fearing for her job, did not take childcare leave. This same boss had fits of rage when, upon returning to work, she would leave the office at 6pm to pick up the baby from daycare. She eventually left the company for a position elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

### **Implementing flexibility: incremental change?**

In the beginning of this paper, I note that flexible work arrangements may create the potential for female employees to remain at work throughout marriage and

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<sup>11</sup> She remarked to me after she left the company that she feels some Japanese firms are now well underway in implementing Childcare Leave, and that there is no problem with taking it, because the companies have a long-term perspective, expecting the career woman to stay twenty or thirty years on the job. What's one year in twenty? Not so long. But American firms have a much shorter timeline of expectation for their employees, she noted.

childrearing years, while they could give men the time to participate more fully in the lives of their families. In other language, the corporation, through the introduction of such policies, could be acting as a positive change agent in the Japanese urban setting. Is it?

The answer to this question is not so simple. Married women with children strongly welcome these initiatives, but they are also skeptical about what it will take to really “change the culture.” As I mentioned above, many mid-level managers are not eager to implement policies that go against the style of work they have embraced up to now. There may not be anything particularly cultural about this hesitance; researchers of US workplaces also point to mid-managers as being the strongest roadblocks to implementation.<sup>12</sup>

- The long hours of overtime in some sections renders FWAs meaningless. Commutes in Tokyo average over an hour each way; some are more than two hours each way. Overtime is an issue for women with family responsibilities since most of their husbands cannot be relied on to do housework or childcare during the week. If one works an eight hour day in such sections, it is as if one is working a part—time job.
- In sections where team work is prevalent, it is particularly difficult to implement FWAs such as reduced hours for regular staff. Japanese workers in particular are educated to have a strong team consciousness. Many people I interviewed told me that to leave the team early to go home makes one feel as if one is causing a great inconvenience to others (*meiwaku*). This is considered to be inexcusable behavior (*moshiwakenai*). It might be accepted for emergencies, but on a regular basis it is very difficult to maintain amicably.
- Daycare centers generally close at 6pm, although a few remain open until 7pm. Most women choose a center near their home rather than face a crowded commute by train to the office with a baby in tow. This means they must leave work in the late afternoon in order to meet the day care closing time. Women devise various means of handling this problem, including moving house close to the company, asking relatives to pick up the child from daycare, or hiring a professional babysitter or home daycare provider to pick up the child and wait at home. A few even hire nannies, a very costly option in Japan.

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<sup>12</sup> As of yet there are no explicit disincentives or incentives in place for managers to be active proponents of these policies.

- Women's responsibility as mother is aggravated by lack of domestic work on their husbands' part. Most women we interviewed are virtually single parents during the week; their husbands do not return home until very late. Some husbands also go to work on the weekend. Most husbands work for Japanese corporations that have less flexibility than MNF has. Unless most corporations make similar plans to give their workers more flexibility, such policies in a minority of firms will certainly not suffice to alter the household division of labor for working couples in this country. If this cannot be altered, then FWAs have the potential to be turned into a female "mommy track" ghetto. The women I am studying are not unlike Hochschild's (1989) American women who do the "second shift" of household labor, except that the amount of household labor they can expect from their spouses is less.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, until now most workers on reduced hours are doing so for to care for family. Unless more workers make use of flexibility for non-family related reasons (such as study goals or community service), workers who do not have children may feel resentment.
- Women with children can be divided into two groups; those with family help and those with none. Some women with family help get considerable help, as with one worker whose retired father came to live with her and her husband for the first year of baby's life (leaving her mom watching her brother's child in another city) until he could be placed in a daycare center. The flip side of depending on close relatives for childcare is the felt obligation and desire to then care for one's relatives should they need assistance in old age. While eldercare leave should be useful in such circumstances, it is at this point rather short (3 months) and unpaid. Nursing homes are insufficient in number as well as being culturally unacceptable alternatives for elderly people needing assisted care.
- Those with no family help may have a difficult time as there are long wait lists for daycare for babies in many of Tokyo's wards. Daycare for mildly ill children is not readily available, and casual babysitting by neighborhood teenagers or neighbor women is not done. While public and private licensed daycare is affordable and of high quality, at present it is insufficient to meet the demand. Outsourcing of other household tasks, such as housecleaning, is

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<sup>13</sup> A 1998 campaign sponsored by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, aimed at getting men to contribute more to childcare, noted that the average amount of time men spent per day on household tasks was 17 minutes (Roberts, 1999).

- costly and not the usual practice.
- Some women we have interviewed have complained that upon returning from childcare leave they were assigned tedious jobs and were no longer given challenging work, out of the perception of management that challenging work could not be completed in the course of a normal work day. Such boring work saps motivations and causes these women to wonder if they would not be performing more “value-added” work by staying at home minding their own child instead. So far one woman has resigned over this problem.
  - As in other countries, men hesitate to take CCL or reduced hours for regular staff. So far no one at MNF has taken them. We held a focus group for working fathers, but only two men came. More did, however, participate in the Bring Your Children to Work Day. The regular practice in Japan of dispatching employees to far-flung branches of the company for years at a time (*tanshinfunin*), unaccompanied by spouses, also makes “flexibility” seem a bit inflexible for the working partner left at home.
  - Female employees we have talked with have been very positive about FWA initiatives, and they have also been positive about government policies to expand spaces in daycare centers and increase the hours of care provided. Most women are dissatisfied with the little time their husbands participate in childcare and housework, but they also recognize that their husband's work environments do not allow them to participate.
  - Through the Take your Child to Work Day, in which both boys and girls come to the office and are hosted with activities, was initiated as a means of getting people to recognize that their fellow workers may also be moms and dads, to try to bridge this divide between private life and corporate life. It has been well received, but it is not a “natural” at MNF, where workers hesitate to bring up family matters in small talk, and pictures of family are not usually placed prominently on desks. The exception to this is that some workers now use screen savers featuring their children's faces.
  - While it might not seem like a revolution, most of the women we have interviewed report that their spouses were present at their children's birth, and some were able to arrange to take some paid holidays off. Several women told me that their husbands take the child to the daycare center in the morning, something rarely seen a generation ago. One woman remarked that her husband had more flexibility in the first year of the baby's life than she did, because he had been seconded to a different workplace for this period. When it



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was over, though, he had to go back to working until 3am every morning, and he no longer sees his son during weeknights. She said he and the baby are going through withdrawal. My point is that at least some men in Japan now want to spend time caring for their families but are constrained from it by their workplace environments.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have attempted to weave the actions of three players in a bid to alter the work environment in Japan: the state, MNF, and MNF's employees. The state, because of its concerns over the low birthrate, appears to be highly interested in the notion of flexibility, but is adopting a very soft approach in educating corporations to embrace it. MNF has put substantial resources behind introducing FWAs and is continuing to explore new flexible options. It is too early to tell how much of an impact the flexible initiatives will have on worker recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and gender equality at MNF. I hope to view this firm longitudinally to follow the workers who have started making use of these policies.

The external cultural and social-institutional environment is gradually changing toward acceptance of dual-career families, although the obstacles remain high. Primary among them is the male work standard and gender role that see time spent at work as a man's commitment to his family embodied. Public and private are being continually negotiated in the lives of MNF workers, but the negotiation is mostly between female workers, their managers and the relatives, institutions and others who care for their children. For the most part, male spouses, (who work at other corporations), are not negotiating. Moreover, very few employees are taking advantage of FWAs for reasons other than caring for family members. We have yet to see anyone, male or female, come forth to request reduced hours for a year of volunteer work or to gear up for some sports challenge, for instance. It will be interesting to see whether these first steps toward flexibility at MNF eventually embolden male employees, as well as singles, to make use of flexibility in their lives. At the present time, however, one is left asking, "Where is the balance?"

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