

"Why Has an Expanding Movement of Worker Co-operatives Emerged in Japan among Middle Aged, Middle Class Housewives over the Past 15 Years?"

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Co-operatives emerge where markets fail: middle-aged, middle-class housewives are the last abundant labor source not yet fully integrated into Japan's market economy. Government policies designed to bolster a "breadwinner plus housewife" family system reinforce the particular ways Japan's labor market fails women. Worker co-operatives offer an opportunity for housewives in Japan's new middle class to work part-time and, by controlling the conditions of their own labor, still care for their families to their own exacting standards. Over the past 15 years an emerging movement dedicated to organizing worker co-operatives has attracted increasing numbers of women in the Tokyo-Yokohama region. As many as 12,000 women now work at women's worker co-operatives (WWCs) (Watanabe n.d., Iwami 2000:234-258).

In December, 1982, a handful of women in Kanagawa Prefecture started Ninjin, Japan's first WWC (Sato 1988:393). 'Ninjin' means 'carrot' in Japanese: the business began as the workforce for a consumer co-operative's produce distribution center. But these women write the name of their business using duplicate characters with the meaning 'person, or people'. In colloquial American English 'Ninjin' should be taken as "The People People," just how these women think of themselves. Extending Ninjin's breakthrough, women opened another fifteen WWCs over the next two years. The decade following Ninjin's founding saw 7000 women start over 250 WWCs (Kanagawa Worker Collective League 1994:1). The authoritative roster compiled by Workers' Collective Network Japan, the official organ of the WWC movement, lists 463 WWCs in business in February, 2000 (Iwami 2000:234-258). They call their co-

operatives wākāzu korekuteibu, the romanization of the Japanese transcription of the phrase 'workers' collective', adopted from usage current in the 1970s on the west coast of North America.

The women owning, running and working in these WWCs are overwhelmingly middle-aged and middle-class. Over eighty percent are between 40 and 60 years old, more than half in their forties (Sumitani 2000:35, Kutsuzawa 1998:82). Their household incomes, rates of homeownership and educational accomplishments are well above national averages (Kutsuzawa 1998:82-84). WWCs' many different business activities arise from the knowledge, skills, interests and values members developed as well-educated wives and mothers, and in consumer co-operatives. A partial list of business activities spun off from Ninjin alone includes recycling shop, cooking class, lunch restaurant, home care service, day care, culture class (karuchā kyōshitsu), marriage counseling, hand made goods, ice cream making, soap making, welfare co-operative, bread bakery, display group, translating, printing, editing, international exchanges, video production, consumer co-operative office work, delivery service, "and so on" (Utsuki 1993:8). WWCs practice principles of workplace democracy, ownership equality and social responsibility.

Its critics assert that the WWC alternative to the economic status quo can only continue as long as these women remain dependent on their husbands' substantial incomes. A 1999 survey of 221 members of WWCs found more than two-thirds with spouse's annual income above \$50,000; more than one-fifth were above \$100,000; fifteen percent did not answer the question (Sumitani 2000:37). In 1995 more than two-thirds of WWC members reported annual household incomes above \$80,000 (Kutsuzawa 1998:82). The average income for working households in 1999 was \$68,490 (Japanese Government 2001). In Sumitani's (2000:37) judgement, "The common perception is that the women in worker co-operatives do not work from economic necessity, and these figures bear out that view substantially." The movement's

critics frame a paradox from which we can appropriately launch analysis: why do these women so eagerly bite the hand that feeds them so well ? (Kutsuzawa 1998:88-89; Iwao 1993:266-270).

A first approximation to an answer is not difficult to come by: the appeal and success of worker co-operatives for these women spring from the combination of three particular conditions in their lives. First, the frequency by age curve of the labor market for women has two modes, and is commonly described as "M-shaped": women in the new middle class typically work full-time for several years after graduation, "retire" to bear and raise a small number of children, and then re-enter the market for part-time labor in different, usually much less attractive occupations some years later.

Second, Japan's income tax law hits a household's "secondary income" astonishingly hard above a quite low maximum in the middle-income brackets, a phenomenon infamous as the "Million Yen Wall:" "A wife who earns in excess of 1.03 million yen loses her dependent status and has to pay her own social security taxes and health insurance" (Mason and Ogawa 1998:15). Here, one million yen arbitrarily though not unrealistically equals ten thousand US dollars (Horioka 1998:3). Effectively, the first \$10,000 a dependent wife earns is tax exempt; the next \$7000 to \$10,000 will all go to taxes of one kind or another. At the low hourly wages typical of jobs available to them, middle-aged women must expect to work 20 to 25 hours per week to earn \$10,000. Vanishingly few jobs paying more than \$20,000 are available to the women who start WWCs. In the deeply sarcastic words of Komori Chie (1993:32), Director of the Labor Project for the Kanagawa Women's Conference, in her keynote address to WWC activists at a conference celebrating the 10th anniversary of the founding of Ninjin, "If you don't make over a million yen, and are a wife who diligently raises her children to become superior company warriors, waits up for the return home of her husband and fixes him a delicious meal [laughter], your husband's taxes will be reduced." The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (1985) and the Young Childcare Leave Law (1992) are of a piece with tax law, designed to prop up a family structure in which economically dependent wives

devote much of their time to the care of their rarely divorced husbands, fewer than two children, and the world's longest lived parents-in-law.

Third, almost all members of WWCs have long belonged to the Seikatsu Club Consumer Co-operative (SCCC), internationally extolled for its motto "Stop Shopping," its social activism, and its distinctive structure of networked small groups. SCCC intentionally incubated the first several WWCs as part of its overall aim to create alternatives in Japanese society.

Taken together, these three circumstances mark out a category of Japanese women predisposed toward cooperation and prepared to experiment with co-operation in its less familiar forms. Looking for appealing work once again, these women can create, with family savings they themselves manage, work opportunities where they control their own labor and schedules, as they are accustomed to do as housewives, consumer co-operative members, and even co-operative and social activists. Conservatively, hundreds of thousands of Japanese women might see themselves in this specific description. According to a 1987 survey by the Kanagawa Prefecture Consumer Co-operative League, slightly less than half of member housewives were employed, half of those remaining without work wanted it, and half of those wanting work wanted it at their consumer co-operative (Iwami 2000:54). In 1999 over 20 million members owned more than 650 consumer co-operatives in Japan (Co-op Japan 2001). From the late 1960s to the early 1990s, the singular SCCC itself grew to over a quarter of a million members, 95 percent of whom are women (SCCC 1993:2). The resources these novice entrepreneurs bring to their businesses, coupled with the advantages to them of working co-operatively (Marshall 1995), have allowed them to succeed and their movement to grow steadily from the mid-1980s through the present during successive phases of intense speculation, collapse and recession, and continuing stagnation and turmoil in Japan's market economy.

A second approximation toward an answer which comprehends this movement must take into account the binds or contradictions as well as the opportunities working cooperatively in this context presents to these women. The prominent theme of the desirability of women's "independence" and "self-reliance" (jichi, jiritsu) echoes throughout the movement (Kutsuzawa 1998:74; Utsuki 1993:12), and from which point of view the Million Yen Wall and other forms of discrimination are strongly decried. The independence most women working in WWCs want, however, is from waged employment and the constraints of current tax law, not from their families or communities. Independence from families or communities has not been a reason Japanese women mention for taking employment (Roberts 1994:70). So while many women want to work more hours in their WWCs than they do, many other women resist pressure within their WWC to work more hours by letting the Million Yen Wall deflect co-workers' unspoken accusations of selfishness. The sharp limit on their work hours, whether they want to work only part-time or not, lets these women better fulfill their obligations to family and community, obligations SCCC philosophy prominently embraces as the essence of personal life, the best of a way of life that is being destroyed by the commodification of the skills and relationships needed for daily living (Utsuki 1993:8; Tsuchiyama 1986:44). Rather than themselves work more, many women would prefer men to work less, and in different ways (Iwao 1993:208-212, Kawamoto 1993:30, Lam 1993:220).

WWC members' motives, ambitions and convictions are more complex, more diverse, more imaginative than their critics or supporters give them credit for, and the movement continues to grow steadily because it offers multiple, flexible, interesting, ambiguous, income-earning opportunities to middle-aged, middle-class women. Characterizations of revolution, reaction, reform or mere adaptation all fail to comprehend adequately this complex movement's creation of appealing alternatives to the economic status quo. Below I explore and elaborate on this general pattern with participant observation data from my 1994 fieldwork at the WWC lunch-catering restaurant "Shun," from Kutsuzawa's (1998)

1995 ethnography of a similar site, and from a variety of survey and interview data produced within and around the WWC movement itself. Sections examining the labor market for women in Japan and government policies affecting women's waged work and status as dependents follow a look at how women work at Shun and the relation of the WWC movement to the SCCC.

Working at a Women's Worker Co-operative

Fourteen housewives 40 to 62 years old own and operate the lunch-catering restaurant (shidashi-bentoya) Shun ("In Season"). All members of SCCC, these women replied independently to a notice in the SCCC newsletter that Seikatsu Club Saitama wanted to start a WWC lunch restaurant in its soon-to-be-built prefectural headquarters building. To get Shun off the ground, each woman bought one ¥100,000 share. In its fourth year when I went to work there, Shun was already finding its space cramped, but they remain in business at this same address to the present moment.

Shun serves a lunch that any of its members would make for a friend visiting her home, and their friends do often drop by Shun to lunch and chat. Shun's meals are all handmade home cooking, from wholesome Seikatsu Club ingredients. They serve a different lunch every day. Each member cooks everything in Shun's repertoire of some 100 main dishes and as many side dishes. No one's appearance suggests she is not at home, cooking in her own kitchen. Shun explicitly decided not to wear uniforms (oshikise), so common in Japanese businesses of all kinds. They favor slacks, even jeans, and blouses, even sweatshirts, and big colorful aprons with big pockets. They told me their first year was hard because no one would be frank. Since then it's been busy but fun. After only one month in business one of the original members quit: the work was just too hard. Her investment was returned to her whole. No one has quit since and three additional members have joined.

The space and equipment were designed and installed by the Saitama SCCC to be a WWC lunch restaurant from the start. A half-wall and divided curtain (noren) split the space into a kitchen in back

and a lunch-counter and tables out front, which area they call "omise," their "shop." On a typical day six women make 125 lunches, 30 of which they serve out front and the rest they deliver to five or six customers. A slow day might reach only half that number of lunches. On a busy day as many as ten members cook 200 or more lunches in the overcrowded kitchen. Orders from a PTA meeting or a local consumer cooperative conference generate even occasional 300-lunch days. Shun's members work long days, from 8:30 AM to 7:00 PM or later, but everywhere in Japan "part-time" means long days and often hours even as long as those of "regular" employees (Kondo 1990:289-290; Hendry 1993:236).

Mornings start slowly, sometimes with a cup of tea and a bun on slower days while a few late customers phone in small orders, hoping to be squeezed in. The bulk of orders are placed days in advance or left standing by their best customers, particularly SCCC and Saitama Consumer Co-operative members and employees, and Saitama Prefectural Government office workers. The pace speeds up gradually, timed to get the deliveries all out the door in a burst, hot, and into the waiting delivery cars at 11:30 AM. Shun then serves lunch out front to walk-in customers until 1:00 or so, as long as the food holds out. The cooks eat their own cooking for lunch from 1:00 to 2:00, that day's meal when any remains. Today's cooks plan tomorrow's menu while eating lunch and just after. They wash the pots, pans and then the dirty lunch boxes from 2:00 until done, often 5:00 or later, and then get started cooking tomorrow's meal until 7:00.

Rarely does anyone work two full days in a row, though a late afternoon followed by a whole day is common enough. Between the fourth of January and the thirtieth of March, the period of my stint, chance composed the same crew, seven workers, only twice, Feb. 7 and Feb. 14. For a small worker co-operative of part-time workers to succeed for ten years, it cannot depend over much on any one or two members. Shun even had three members get training as bookkeepers. In general, no member works

more days than she wants to work and several not nearly as many. Shun did a great deal of hour-juggling to avoid anyone hitting the Million Yen Wall as the end of the fiscal year approached.

One Saturday morning each month they clean their restaurant from top to bottom and then talk over their business for two to three hours after lunch. An annually elected director chairs these meetings, but has no unique authority otherwise. At Shun, emphatically no one is in charge. While they had once talked about putting one person in charge of each day's work on a rotating basis, the sort of system Kutsuzawa (1998:118) documents for the WWC lunch restaurant Sō, the desire for maximally flexible scheduling ultimately came to determine their practice.

The current happy state of their business does not represent the pinnacle of success to all of these women. In separate conversations four members told me of their hopes to open restaurants, bakeries or cooking schools of their own. Several of the fourteen members would like Shun to grow and diversify. To this end Shun bid on and won the catering for the Saitama Teachers Union's 400-guest party thrown to celebrate the opening of the union's new office building. The days before the party were hectic with preparation. Shun closed on the date of the event itself. On the night before the party, four members slept upstairs in the tatami room of the SCCC office building that houses their kitchen. Two members did not work on the party, one ill with flu and another keeping previous arrangements made for a ski vacation with her family.

WWCs and SCCC

A little more than a third of WWCs are in the food industry (Sumitani 2000:38), not surprising in a movement started by a consumer food co-operative. Unlike other consumer co-operatives, however, SCCC continues to develop ever-greater member activism on several fronts rather than turn the co-operative into a chain of stores. In the words of Yokota Katsumi, one of the founders of Seikatsu Club

Kanagawa, "It is not our ultimate purpose in life, as individuals, to buy safe reliable consumer goods at reasonable prices" (Yokota 1991:11).

Two hundred Tokyo housewives started SCCC in 1965 to buy whole milk, rather than the reconstituted milk alone available in industry channels. Early in its history SCCC developed the three fundamental and interrelated practices that continue to distinguish this organization as a consumer co-operative: small group ordering and distribution (han seido) by co-operative procurement (kyōdō kōnyū) directly from the producer (sanchoku). Together, these three systems take the place of stores and shopping. But they also require carefully coordinated activity among members, especially at the level of the small group, the han, whose 8-15 members stay in frequent contact. Seikatsu Club activism extends outward from han solidarity.

The organization's history shows annual increases in membership and increasing activism by members over a spreading range of activities. Members founded Ninjin in 1982, and elected SCCC's first ten women representatives to municipal assemblies in 1983. Membership in the consumer co-operative underpins the rest of SCCC member activism.

The mid-1980s saw the percentage of full-time housewives drop below half for the first time (Ueno 1987:S80). As part-time employment began to rise even among SCCC members, many SCCC members also began to experience schedule conflicts between their part-time jobs and their han activities (Sato 1995). The depot emerged from SCCC's efforts both to accommodate employed members and to provide an alternative form of work for unemployed members (Kutsuzawa 1998:73). Ninjin started at "Depot," the Kanagawa distribution center. Introduced in 1981, the depot system solved at a stroke two problems for SCCC: busy members could have their orders prepared for pick-up separate from the rest of their han, and members who wanted to make money through SCCC could join a WWC to work at their depot -- at first, office work and member order handling (Utsuki 1993:6).

This plan dovetailed closely with SCCC's other activities in politics and environmentalism designed to reach out to a wider population. The SCCC's so-called "soap movement" illustrates their creation of imaginative alternatives that reach out to recruit through networked activism. Following their initial success organizing a consumer co-operative, activists within SCCC began a petition drive to have synthetic detergents banned in 1977. In Japan wash water is not treated but discharged directly into the "gray water" stream. Synthetic detergents are a major and serious pollutant throughout Japan's waterways, and also a source of allergic reactions among infants from laundered diapers (Utsuki 1993:6). Housewives are linked to a second substantial source of water pollution when they rinse used cooking oil down the kitchen sink into the "gray water" system where it too enters, remains in, and kills rivers, streams and wetlands.

The genius of the SCCC "soap movement" was to create networks among SCCC members for the collection and manufacture of soap from used cooking oil. Individual housewives collect and turn in their used cooking oil, and use the easily biodegradable soap made from it in place of synthetic detergents in their homes; movement activists collect used oil and make soap in public places, and educate and recruit around these environmental problems; and WWCs make soap from the used oil on a larger scale and distribute it through the SCCC. Other worker co-operatives in Japan design and manufacture appropriate-scale soap-making machines; a washing machine designed to be especially effective using this soap rather than synthetic detergent is on the horizon (Marshall 1997). SCCC activists made the Kanagawa Prefectural legislature's failure to act on their petition into the springboard from which to launch SCCC member candidates. Over 100 SCCC members had been elected to local and regional assemblies by 1995 (see Iwao 1993:242-264). SCCC members have used their organization to create an expanding array of social, political, and above all alternative economic opportunities, first for consumption and more recently for production.

Women at Work in Japan

Many women want work connected to their consumer co-operatives because employment opportunities for women returning to the labor market are unattractive. Ueno (1987:S80) stresses the fact that "part-time work was an invention of employers rather than the result of women's demand to work," arising from a constant labor shortage in Japanese industry into the 1970s and again in the 1980s. By the late 1970s, high rates of economic growth had given way to an economy characterized by the oxymoronic "stagflation." Middle-class, middle-aged women began to take employment to provide households with supplementary incomes, money that would be spent predominantly on their children's education and on housing. This desire to be better mothers brought many more women into the growing market for part-time labor in the "bubble" economy of the late 1980s.

Since the early 1970s an increasing fraction of women has continued to enter a market for part-time labor which presents them no unambiguously attractive opportunities. Numerical views and interpretations of many aspects of women's labor in Japan are widely available in English (Japanese Government 2001, Ogasawara 1998, Sugimoto 1997, Roberts 1994, 1996, Iwao 1993, Ōmori 1993, Chambers 1989). By 1991 women made up more than forty percent of the total paid workforce, and by 1991 more than fifty percent of women between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five engaged in waged labor. Virtually all women in Japan marry, and by 1983 the ever-increasing fraction of married women working at waged labor crossed the one-half mark for the first time. By 1991 this number had reached almost sixty percent. Single women now make up only about one-third of the female labor force.

Unlike men, "a large number of women leave the labor market after marriage and childbirth" (Ogasawara 1998:18). While over seventy-five percent of Japanese women in their early twenties are now employed for wages, this fraction drops to about one-half for women in their early thirties. When women complete the reproductive and child rearing phases of their lives many re-enter the labor force: about

seventy percent of women in their late forties are now working for wages outside the home. However, "regular full-time jobs are not usually available for women over thirty years of age" (Ömori 1993:97). Lebra (1993:371) records from survey data that only sixteen percent of women favored a continuous work career, and that over fifty percent preferred that their second-stage work be part-time.

Only negligible numbers of women work in upper management career tracks in companies with more than one hundred employees even today (Ogasawara 1998:19-20), fifteen years after the passage of Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law (Creighton 1996, Lam 1993). However, the "trough of the M" hits its low point at about fifty percent of thirty-year-olds: variation in age of marriage and first birth notwithstanding, a significant fraction of women, about twenty percent of their cohort a decade ago (Ueno 1987:S80), does actually remain employed from school door to final retirement with extremely little time off (Roberts 1996:241). With regard to the kinds of opportunities for waged work available to SCCC members who start or join WWCs, it is notable that the low point in the middle of the M does only fall to fifty percent. The number of women employed by the smallest firms rises steeply with age (Roberts 1994:27): the majority of employed women move from the largest firms in the first peak of the M to the smallest firms in the second peak of the M, where pay, working conditions and job security are all worse.

Lo (1990) captures this important index of class difference as the distinction between "office ladies and factory women." The women factory workers whose work lives Roberts (1994) documents make up a "regular" permanent, not a part-time temporary, female blue-collar work force who return in the long second stage of their work careers to factory jobs much like those they left briefly for childbirth, but often to smaller factories and at lower pay. "Office ladies," the young women employed before marriage at the largest firms in wholesale and retail, and finance, insurance and real estate especially (Ömori 1993:81), are "not only offered inducements [to retire upon marriage], but sometimes actively discouraged from

continuing work" (Ogasawara 1998:64). Once they leave, "office ladies" are replaced by younger women, rarely returning to their old firms or to their old work, and never to both.

In the popular imagination "office ladies" retire to marry, raise children and care for their white-collared husbands, becoming sengyō shufu "professional housewives" (Lo 1990:9). The notion that a housewife might be "professional" did not arise until the early 1970s when the term emerged to contrast with the category kengyō shufu, a woman with part-time employment in addition to her undiminished and unshared activities as housewife (Ueno 1987:S80, Long 1996:189). The emergence and transformation of the "professional housewife" of the new middle class is well documented (Vogel 1978; Imamura 1987, 1996; Ueno 1987; Hendry 1993; Iwao 1993). The WWC movement began to grow just as Ueno (1987:S80) was observing that "The middle-class ideal, however, is rapidly becoming inaccessible." In this ideal the mistress of the house does not work for a wage, but nurtures her husband, their children, his parents.

When we ask what a professional housewife actually does, and what forces shape her decisions, however, answers become more complicated. The housewifely ideal took on its current shape for Japanese women over a century ago as the Meiji-era modernizers melded dependence and nurturing in the phrase ryōsai kenbo, "good wife, wise mother" (Long 1996, Hendry 1993). Women may acquire a great deal of knowledge and autonomy in order to nurture well, but these acquisitions do not lead to independence. Self-reliance does not lead to self-sufficiency. Women remain extremely vulnerable to accusations of selfishness. What women do must still be justified by how it benefits those who depend on them and upon whom they also depend, if for different things.

Hendry (1993) and Iwao (1993) discuss the role and activities of professional housewives who incidentally also happen to be SCCC members. The increasing professionalization of household management seen in the search for higher quality and lower prices moves housewives toward consumer co-operatives (Hendry 1993:227), but the housewife's role does not carry expectations of volunteerism

and community service (Imamura 1987:124-9). While housewives' efforts to perform their tasks more effectively have led many out of and well beyond their homes, few women have abandoned, or even disparaged the housewifely role itself as their fundamental identity. SCCC activist candidates for public office draw support by running as "ordinary housewives" (futsū no shufu). They present themselves to voters as 'proxies' (dairinin) for their support networks, rather than use the conventional term 'representative' (daihyō), in order to distinguish themselves from professional office seekers. "As long as it remains relatively difficult for middle-aged women to find work that accommodates the demands of family and home, political involvement ... may offer an appealing alternative" to employment (Iwao 1993:258). And as long as public policy remains focused on inducing married women's dependence on their husbands' incomes to keep them available as unpaid caregivers for family members, activist housewives will continue to focus on the necessity of changing public policy through political action.

Women's Work and Public Policy

Under some circumstances areas of incompatibility between dependence and caregiving become conspicuous, but public ideology and government policy insist that these components are indissolubly fused. To the extent caregiving requires autonomy and independent judgement, and yet remains a "totalizing experience" (Long 1996:166) requiring devotion parallel to men at work, women's experiences lead them to clash with public policy and the dominant ideology. Yet women's practices may also produce, even among allies, radically different interpretations of those practices which can in turn become a source of conflict over the direction and form women's political pressure on policy ought to take.

Policy now assumes that women must be induced to remain economic dependents. Both SCCC philosophy and government policy join in resisting, although for different reasons, the further commodification of caregiving (especially for the increasing numbers of elderly), while they come to

opposed conclusions on keeping middle-aged women dependent on their husbands' incomes. At present two separate bodies of law, equal employment opportunity law and tax law, create effects of dependency of wives on their husbands' incomes. The WWC movement concentrates its attention more intensely on tax law iniquity, but I will discuss the effects of EEOL first.

Japan's 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law is generally understood as a weak step taken to placate critics of continuing discrimination in employment against women, and as such is fundamentally criticized for its lack of teeth (Creighton 1996:196): "The EEO Law does not have enough power to prevent employers' sex-based personnel policies" (Lam 1993:219). Such discrimination continues even in major department stores, easily the employer most responsive to women's circumstances. While department stores employ many women because women are better able than men to sell to women customers, "the interests of the predominantly female employees run counter to the interests of a largely male management" (Creighton 1996:193).

EEOL continues to be interpreted in ways that maintain prohibited harmful practices based on the distinction between male and female employees. Companies are not required to treat all female and male employees equally, but only those employees in the same track. There are two tracks, permanent and not permanent, in the world of pink collar work; women returning to work after childrearing are hired as non-permanent employees. They remain at a wage disadvantage because "the Japanese seniority-based permanent employment system grants higher pay rates for consecutive years of employment with the same company" (Creighton 1996:195). While women in their teens and twenties earn about 80 percent of what men of the same age earn, women in their forties and fifties earn only about half what men of that age earn (Oshima 1998:200).

The Young Childcare Leave Law, which went into effect in 1992, explicitly states that both parents must be allowed to take extended leave after the birth of a child. Few men, however, even in companies

with progressive policies which expressly allow such leave independent of the law, take childcare leave.

In 1999, 97.6% of Young Childcare Leave takers were women (Rödöshö 2000). "Thus, even the passage of a childcare leave law that includes fathers does not indicate that gender role distinctions have vanished or that men and women will easily take advantage of their newly defined legal rights" (Creighton 1996:200). Childcare remains an exclusively female activity in Japan, an activity of each child's own mother.

The great majority of Japanese women "are not prepared to accept the type of 'equal opportunities' offered by their employers," which are exactly those offered to men, requiring long hours, an uninterrupted career, a willingness to accept distant assignments, and "that the occupational sphere remains aloof from the domestic sphere" (Lam 1993:220). Few women choose to live merely diminished versions of men's lives, unable to marry and mother, and pursue a professional career simultaneously. Among the women in managerial positions Creighton randomly met and interviewed for her study of department stores, not one had ever been married (1996:211).

The WWC movement focuses more political effort on the dependent status of women because tax law affects women in WWCs so much more directly, both immediately and after final retirement. Professor Kuba Yoshiko used her keynote address at the May, 1993, symposium sponsored by the National League of Women Tax Accountants, "Thinking About the Million Yen Wall and Part-time Employment," to review the many ways the formula "Female equals Dependent" does not square with reality (Kawamoto 1993:30). In her workshop "Tax and Women Supporting the 21st Century" at the conference celebrating Ninjin's 10th anniversary, Ninjin board member Kawamoto Reiko helped WWC activists apply Kuba's materials to their own WWCs. The next two paragraphs adumbrate the contents of these presentations.

'Worker co-operative' is not a legally recognized form of enterprise in Japan, but those who work in them have any earnings from them taxed as wage income. What remains after the ¥680,000 waged-income deduction is taken out is subject to taxation. From total income there is also a ¥350,000 basic

deduction, so the income tax on income up to ¥1,030,000 is zero. Tax must be paid on anything above ¥1,030,000. When the husband is the primary income earner in the family, if the net income of the wife is less than ¥350,000 and the taxable income of the main income earner is less than ¥1,030,000, a "spousal exemption" of the ¥310,000 resident tax (jūminzei) can be taken. Beyond this, the "spousal special exemption" is available if the husband's total income is below ¥1,030,000 and the wife's income is within ¥1,350,000. In such cases the maximum tax from the wife's income is ¥350,000 and the resident tax is exempted. The amount of the exemption changes in proportion to the wife's income, and by combining "spousal deduction" and "spousal special deduction," a tax schedule is developed in decrements of ¥50,000 from ¥750,000 to zero yen. The household income, or at least the total net income of the husband and wife when the income of the wife surpasses ¥1,030,000 if they must pay both income and resident taxes, increases as the wife's income increases.

If the wife works and exceeds this framework of tax (and social security for covered dependents), there occurs an "income reversal phenomenon" (Kawamoto 1993:28), a decrease in after-tax income. If the wife earns more than ¥1,030,000, or in some rare cases ¥1,300,000, the couple will lose exemptions of up to ¥680,000 depending on how much more she earns, in addition to having to pay social security and health insurance premiums for both husband and wife. In brief and in general, only the first \$10,000 (or in extremely rare cases, \$13,000) married women make can be tax exempt, and the next \$6500 to \$9500 they earn all go to taxes in one form or another. If a married women earns \$10,000 a year working 20~30 hours per week, it cannot be worth her while to work even much more except at much higher wages, and there are no jobs with such high pay available for middle-aged women returning to the labor market. Because most women's families will lose her dependent's deduction of \$6500 as soon as she earns more than \$10,000, it is a dead loss for her to earn between \$10,000 and \$16,500. Because of this, the phrase "The Million Yen Wall" was born.

A questionnaire answered by forty-four of sixty-six participants circulated after Kawamoto's tax workshop. Only one of the forty-four respondents was single. Thirty-one of the forty-four wanted to work more hours than they did, but did not work more because of the Million Yen Wall. Thirty-four of forty-four said they would participate politically to topple the Million Yen Wall, and thirty-four also made less than ¥1,300,000 (with five above ¥1,300,000 and five giving no answer).

Among comments gathered from participants after Kawamoto's tax workshop was the following: "As long as we let our work be guided by the Million Yen Wall, we are participating in a secret plan (hisaku) which worker co-operatives' operations too keep on maintaining. We aim at jobs (shigoto) and independence (jrirtsu), but these things are not possible, I realized once again" (Kawamoto 1993:31).

Another participant's comment focused the cause of her irritation somewhat nearer at hand: "Although I am now thinking about joining social security, I feel acutely the lack of consciousness among members of WWCs, and irritation at their lack of support for people aiming at independence and crossing the Million Yen Wall" (Kawamoto 1993:32). Yet the reason surveyed WWC members overwhelmingly gave for working at all is to create ikigai, "a purpose in life," followed by "help out with the family budget" and "revive my experience." Keizaiteki jrirtsu, "economic independence," finished out of the money, ahead of only "make better use of my leisure time" (Sumitani 2000:54). At this point, that some WWC members do not support economic independence for other WWC members through their WWCs must surprise no one, but certainly few WWC members can care to have such different desires aired openly in their own WWC. Where then might the WWC movement bring its deepest solidarity to bear most effectively?

Policy Implications and Conclusion

WWCs are much more likely to have success with another legislative priority, a national worker co-operative law. Many WWC members already link this goal directly to their tax complaints as well. Forty percent of surveyed WWC members think that tax, insurance and social security problems are rooted in

the government's failure to recognize the particular characteristics of worker co-operatives and provide in law for their differences from regular businesses (Sumitani 2000:65). These same WWC members also think for this reason enactment of a worker co-operative law should be the movement's highest priority for activism. In this goal, they have allies among other businesses in Japan's wider worker co-operative movement (Marshall 1994) as well as among politicians, bureaucrats, newspaper editorial boards, activists and academics.

Even after a national Worker Co-operative Law is passed, however, and the pending issues of social security premium payments, insurance eligibility, business tax liability and dividend distribution are resolved in a rational way for those who work in Japan's worker co-operatives, for the women who work in WWCs and see themselves as part of a growing movement for social alternatives, the status of women as dependents will not have changed and will not be more likely to change. It may be even less likely to change. Many women will continue to prefer to work part-time in order to be better caregivers and better human beings, rather than "shopping robots" or "worker bees."

How much part-time work will be worth their while will remain a problem for many of these women. While over seventy percent of WWC members are dissatisfied with their earnings, WWC members overwhelmingly believe themselves better off than if they had to accept conventional part-time employment, entirely because they are able to control their own work (Kutsuzawa 1998:86). Both despite and because of the Million Yen Wall, the WWC movement will remain an attractive possibility to the large number of middle-class women looking for ways to create a life worth living once their children are well along in school, a life that does not lapse into the short-term part-time employment of so many middle-aged women, that does not emulate the lifelong full-time employment of their husbands, and that does not even evolve into full-time work in a women's worker co-operative.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments Research for this article was conducted in Japan during the summer of 1991 and the 12 months from September, 1993, to September, 1994. This research was supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council, the U.S. Department of Education Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Program, and Western Washington University Bureau for Faculty Research. I thank particularly Tomizawa Kenji for his generous hospitality during my 1993-94 residence as Visiting Research Professor at Hitotsubashi University Institute of Economic Research while he was director of that entirely estimable institute, and Tsukamoto Ichiro, who guided me to and around the already large and still rapidly growing Japanese language literature on Japan's worker cooperatives. The staff and members of the Japan Institute of Co-operative Research as well extended to me every consideration and several opportunities to present my ideas for criticism and comment while I developed them. Their collective remarks were always helpful. Current JIRC director Sakabayashi Tetsuo provided extensive comment on an earlier version of this paper. Ninjin member and former Kanagawa Prefectural Assembly Member Watanabe Mitsuo and her anonymous tax accountant have vetted my numbers and done their best to keep them accurate. Remaining inaccuracies remain my own responsibility. Tom Roehl, Kathy Saunders and Betsy Pernotto all helped me separate what was from what wasn't important in earlier drafts.

Translations from Japanese language materials are my own.

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