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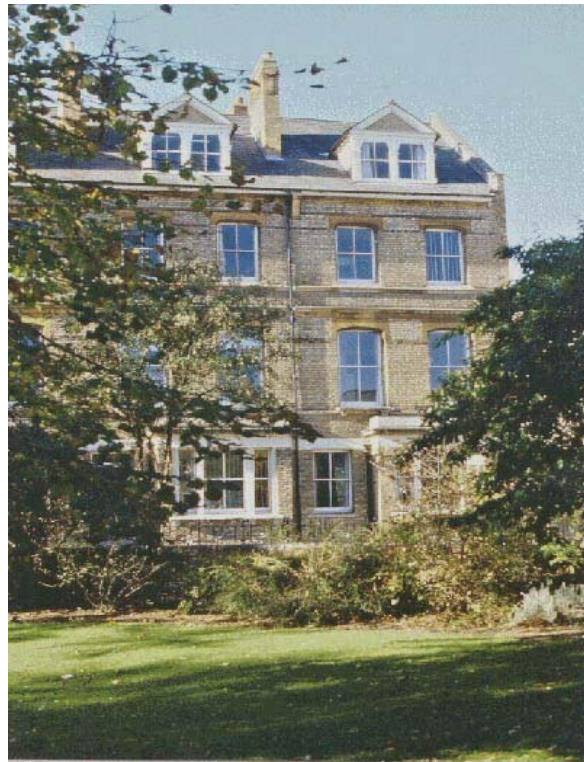
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## **Is Japanese family policy turning 'Nordic?'**

Exposing key challenges for Japan's parental  
leave and child care schemes

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**Abstract:**

*This paper analyses the family policy reforms in Japan since the early 1990s with a particular focus on public parental leave and childcare schemes. It employs the 'Nordic model' of family policy as a comparative tool, reflecting the frequent portrayal (by native Japanese policy analysts) of Nordic policies as models that Japan should follow.*

*The comparisons here shed light on critical challenges that Japan faces in enacting effective family policies in the contemporary context. We find that while considerable convergence has taken place between Japanese family policy and the 'Nordic model' on the level of policy prescriptions, marked discrepancies remain in terms of policy integration and coverage. Shortage of childcare provision following statutory parental leave limits the ability of Japanese parents to reconcile child-rearing and careers, and the ineligibility of most 'irregular workers' for parental leave severely curtails the potential of this central component of family policy.*

*The results of this paper testify to the highly context-dependent and demanding nature of comprehensive family policies. The immediate challenge in Japan's case is to coordinate family policies in an integrated fashion. This includes more effectively bridging parental leave and childcare schemes and extending coverage of parental leave to the majority of irregular workers.*

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## 1. Introduction: What does the ‘Nordic model’ have to do with Japanese family policy?

Japan, a country previously known for traditionalist or ‘Confucian’ approaches to welfare provision rather than state social policy largesse, appears to have changed course in the early 1990s when it launched a series of new family policy measures. Many of these carry potentially wide-ranging implications to both individuals and the society at large.<sup>1</sup> In 1992 came the first piece of parental leave legislation; in 1994 and 1999 the two Angel Plans that strove to significantly enhance the country’s childcare infrastructure; and in 2000, 2001 and 2004 reforms were carried out that would relax and expand the eligibility conditions for state child allowance.<sup>2</sup> These and other related policy initiatives have been interspersed with an impressive number of meetings by ministries, deliberative councils (*shingikai*) and sets of ‘experts’, summoned typically to reflect on how to create an environment more conducive to child-bearing and child-raising; how to assist citizens in balancing work and family duties; and, perhaps most importantly, how to rejuvenate Japan’s declining birth rate through government policy.<sup>3</sup>

This surprisingly aggressive drive towards a more comprehensive family policy constitutes the first tentative link between Japanese and Nordic policy.<sup>4</sup> The Nordic states are well-known among social policy analysts for their generosity towards families – expressed through policies such as long and comparatively well-compensated parental leave and affordable public childcare – as well as for their moderately high fertility rates.<sup>5</sup> Support measures for families in the Nordic countries are no longer seen as mere social *policies* but as social *rights* in and of themselves, to

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Goodman and Peng (1996) and Takahashi (1997) for accounts on the Japanese welfare state up to the 1990s. Japan’s traditional emphasis on the family and companies as welfare providers, enforced for instance through an income tax policy that encourages limited labour market participation by married women, has been viewed as a defining characteristic of the so-called East Asian welfare model.

<sup>2</sup> See Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2005:106 for a chronological summary of relevant developments between 1990 and 2004 in Japanese. For English overviews of the reforms, see Atoh and Akachi, 2003 and Peng, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Japan’s total fertility rate (TFR) hit a record-low of 1.25 children per woman in 2005. This is considerably lower than the rate necessary for population replacement, i.e. a TFR slightly above two children per women.

<sup>4</sup> By the term ‘Nordic’ I refer to Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden exclusively throughout the present study. Occasionally, the term ‘Scandinavian’ is used interchangeably with ‘Nordic’.

<sup>5</sup> The total fertility rates for Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden stood at 1.8, 1.8, 1.8 and 1.7 in 2003 respectively (OECD, 2005a).

be guaranteed in accordance with universalist principles to every citizen and long-term resident. In international terms, such encompassing initiatives have been by and large pioneered by the northern European countries that have enacted broadly similar family policies. Hence, I consider it reasonable to use terms such as ‘Nordic policy’ and the ‘Nordic model’ in this paper.<sup>6</sup>

The pertinent question in relation to Japan is not whether it has suddenly ‘gone Nordic’ in a wholesale fashion, but *whether elements of Nordic-style family policy have begun to emerge in Japan* following the reforms executed in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. In other words, we are interested in investigating whether a measure of *policy convergence* has taken place between the Nordic countries and Japan, in part due to the former acting as a model to the latter.

The second link between Japanese and Nordic family policy arises from the frequent portrayal of Nordic policy by *native Japanese policy analysts* as an ‘ideal model’ that should be followed by Japan.<sup>7</sup> This observation lends credence to the above suggestion regarding a possible policy convergence.

By way of a four-fold typology, native academics and policy-makers typically find Nordic policies relevant to Japan due to the following reasons. First, their apparent positive effects on fertility in a developed country context through supporting women’s labour market involvement (it is pointed out that at present, fertility tends to be higher where women’s labour market participation rates are high); second, their positive impact on families’ economic security and the overall economy through supporting women’s labour market involvement; third, their ability to promote and strengthen gender equality in the workplace as well as in the family; and finally, their positive role in supporting the daily life of families where both parents work.<sup>8</sup> Recently, the Democratic Party of Japan has emerged as one of the most

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to ignore the fact that there is considerable policy diversity among the Nordic countries (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion on the Nordic model).

<sup>7</sup> I do not claim that Nordic countries are the *only* welfare states that have attracted attention in Japanese policy-making circles in this context; e.g. France has been regularly cited as another worthy ‘model’ due to its moderately high birth rate and comprehensive childcare policies. It should be noted that Japan has been involved in a great deal of both voluntary and forced ‘policy-borrowing’ throughout its modern history, especially from the Meiji period (1868-1912) onwards, often mixing policy ideas from several sources and adjusting them to suit local inclinations and circumstances.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of the first view, see Research Committee on Low Fertility and Gender Equality, Council on Gender Equality (2005) for a representative, statistically illustrated argument as well as Maeda (2004:25). Also, see Castles, 2003 for an overview of, and possible explanations for, an apparent ‘reversal in the international incidence of fertility’. The second argument is reviewed in Maeda, 2004:27. The third view is most commonly advocated by feminist writers such as Ōsawa

fervent supporter among Japan's political parties of a range of 'family-friendly' measures, putting forth a strongly-worded proposal that clearly emulates Nordic policies such as a universal and relatively generous child allowance and the so-called 'daddy months' or 'papa quota' (Democratic Party of Japan, 2006:2-4, 11; see Appendix A for an illustration).

With influential scholars and political decision-makers taking an interest in Nordic and Nordic-style policies, a more comprehensive, state-led family policy no longer remains a foreign idea in Japan despite past rejections of, or lack of interest in, such measures. However, this observation begs the question of *what are the predominant motivations that underlie the promotion of such policies in Japan?* Moreover, from the point of view of policy development and effectiveness, *does it matter what these motivations are?* For instance, if this newly-found interest derives largely from demographic concerns of mostly male politicians and bureaucrats, can we still assume that Nordic-style measures – that in the 1960s and 1970s were fervently promoted by female politicians and various women's groups – could emerge in Japan?

The findings of the present study indicate that on the level of *policy prescriptions*, Japanese family policy has indeed moved perceptibly closer to the Nordic model over the 1990s and early 2000s. However, regardless of the state's sudden shift from rhetoric that emphasises 'traditionalist' family-based welfare to an espousal of social responsibility (over child care, for instance), we find that the relevant services are hardly guaranteed to all *as a matter of right*. Also, the evidence suggests that the Japanese child care and parental leave schemes are weak in terms of continuity when compared to Nordic equivalents. While the new parental leave scheme is the one policy that most resembles Nordic leave policies on surface, the stringent eligibility conditions together with women's weak labour market position reduce this similarity in practice. Furthermore, regarding the context for the development of more generous family policies, our comparison suggests that a lack of

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Mari (2004a; 2005) but also by the government through its Gender Equality Bureau ([www.gender.go.jp](http://www.gender.go.jp)). Support for the fourth argument can be found e.g. in government white papers that discuss 'work-family harmonisation' policies (see e.g. MHLW, 2006:227) and in scholarly articles. For example, Atoh and Akachi (2005) suggest that there may be a possibility that Nordic family policy measures such as the papa quota could have an equalising effect on gender relations and hence result in better work-family harmonisation in Japan (Atoh and Akachi, 2005:12).

continuity in welfare discourse, the comparatively weak political influence of women, and the heavy economic burdens associated with demographic ageing are factors that have constrained (and are likely to continue to constrain) the development of such policies in Japan.

### **1.1. On methods, definitions, and ‘care policy’**

This paper is organised into three main parts following this introduction. In Section 2, the ‘Nordic model’ of family policy is defined based on an examination of child care and parental leave reforms in the Nordic countries. In addition, the role of salient actors and discourses is highlighted. Next, in Section 3, the major family policy developments in Japan from the early 1990s to the early 2000s are reviewed. The first part of the section will describe the social and political circumstances underlying the relevant reforms, while the second half will look specifically at changes in, and the present state of, childcare and parental leave systems in Japan. Section 4 delivers the main comparative analysis by contrasting the ‘Nordic model’ with current Japanese family policy to seek answers to our main research question. That is, it examines the extent to which the key features of Nordic family policy are now observable in Japan. The section then reflects on important differences in discourse, women’s political influence and demographic characteristics as possible explanations for the most marked differences in family policy development between the Nordic countries and Japan. A summary of the main findings with suggestions for further research on Japanese family policy concludes the paper.

In terms of methods, this study relies primarily on secondary research that draws on a variety of relevant existing data. Statistics on key family policy outcome indicators from official sources and OECD publications provide support for the core arguments. The analysis of Nordic family policy developments relies mainly on existing scholarly literature and core statistics. The Japanese reforms are traced based on governmental white papers (largely those by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Cabinet Office), relevant Japanese Internet sources, and scholarly articles by both Japanese and foreign authors. Particular effort is put into incorporating Japanese language publications to make up for the paucity of relevant publications in English and to enhance the accuracy of the account.

While it is recognised that ‘family policy’ can in some instances refer to a vast range of policies with implications to families – from housing policies and education to labour regulation – the present study adopts a limited, European definition of the term, using it primarily to refer to *formal childcare* and *parental leave schemes* unless otherwise noted. Other significant measures such as child allowances, equal employment policies and working time regulations are not included here.

Before concluding this introduction, a brief review of *care* as a category of welfare state analysis is in place. Clearly, care was a largely neglected area in the mainstream social policy literature until the early 1990s when feminist scholars began to criticise Esping-Andersen’s *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990) for its lack of attention to the gender-differentiated effects of welfare states and the important role of care policies.<sup>9</sup> Since then, as a result of a vast new body of gender-focused studies and the growing salience of work-life reconciliation, care has gradually come to have been recognised as a central policy dimension with potentially far-reaching implications to women, men, their families and ultimately the sustainability of the societies they comprise.

Clearly, care policy occupies a unique position due to its boundary-crossing nature and its capacity to re-draw lines between what are considered public and private duties. Formal childcare and parental leave schemes are excellent examples of policies with such tendencies: they may simultaneously function as care policies, gender equality policies, labour market policies, educational and child development policies, and as policies of redistribution. As such, they relate to and concern a wide range of actors and interest groups. Unsurprisingly, they remain highly contested due to their capacity to challenge existing norms, including notions of ‘correct’ gender and family roles and ‘moral’ behaviour.

To bring clarity to the analysis of this complex policy domain, Daly and Lewis (2000) have established *social care* as a three-dimensional concept that consists of social care as labour; as part of a normative framework of obligation and responsibility; and as an activity with both financial and emotional costs extending across the public-private boundaries (Daly and Lewis, 2000:285). They have further pointed out that when there is a decrease in the supply of care by the family (due to demographic, social or economic changes) that leads to a *crisis of care*, the welfare

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993; Siaroff, 1994.



state is in a position to act as an important mediator (Daly and Lewis, 2000:289). This amounts to what Leira (2006) calls the ‘politicisation of care’ – in other words, making care an explicit object of policy and negotiation on the societal level, subject to the prevailing balance of political and gender power.

Accordingly, this paper views family policy essentially as *social care policy* and engages with this dynamic policy area not only for its rising salience in many developed countries, but for its multidimensional nature and inevitably normative underpinnings.<sup>10</sup> Comparative research in this area, while methodologically challenging, is ideally positioned to expose not only the cross-national differences in the explicit content of policies (policy prescriptions), but also the complex contexts within which social care policies must function.

## 2. The Nordic model of family policy

*A working mother had to search for a housewife in the neighbourhood willing to look after additional children. This solution was expensive; however, no other alternatives were on offer. Mrs. Ritva Vuorio recalls that ‘childcare fees took up half of a low-paid office worker’s salary’. In the mid-1960s, maternity leave was granted for only two months, after which the mother typically had to return to work in order to make ends meet.*

From the archives of Kontula, a major suburb of eastern Helsinki, Finland<sup>11</sup>

This chapter outlines the main factors underlying the development of family policy in the Nordic countries as well as the main characteristics of Nordic childcare and parental leave systems. It arrives at a minimalist definition of the ‘Nordic model’ that the subsequent comparison will draw on.

At present, Nordic family policies are internationally well-known for their generosity and for their significant role in supporting both high female labour force participation and moderate fertility rates.<sup>12</sup> However, ‘generosity’ was hardly an appropriate word for describing Nordic state provision for families in the first two post-war decades. As Leira points out, the first generations of working mothers in the four Nordic countries enjoyed neither charitable state benefits nor publicly-funded childcare (Leira, 2006:33). Anttonen and Sipilä, writing with reference to Finland in

<sup>10</sup> See Daly and Rake, 2003:48-51 for a more elaborate account on the many dimensions of care.

<sup>11</sup> Kontula (2007). Translated from Finnish by the author.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Esping-Andersen, 2002; Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Huber and Stephens, 2001; Ōsawa, 2005.

particular, remind us that there was nothing inevitable or pre-destined about the development of comprehensive family policy in the Nordic countries, although certain political, economic, social and geographic conditions undoubtedly enabled such development (Anttonen and Sipilä, 2000:108).

Until the major family policy reforms that unfolded in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, care for both the very young and the old was by and large produced and consumed in private households in the Nordic countries. The few public institutions that existed targeted the poor and vulnerable, including parentless children and children whose parents were deemed dangerous or incapable. Although proposals for more comprehensive, even ‘emancipatory’ social services had been put forth by progressive political thinkers as early as the 1930s, the male breadwinner – female carer model remained the norm in the Nordic countries well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

What were the key factors, then, that led to an expansion in family policy, and ultimately to the emergence of the ‘Nordic model’ that this chapter is set out to define? First, great structural changes and a modernisation of lifestyles took place in all of the Nordic societies after the Second World War as people flocked from farms and the countryside to booming cities. With urbanisation, an economic boom and rising levels of education, general living standards and incomes improved, and generations that had previously lived together were separated geographically. This inevitably led to a great reduction in the capacity of households to supply care to their members – a situation that would be aggravated as more and more women entered the urban labour markets.

Female labour market participation was facilitated not to a small extent by the highly favourable economic conditions at the time: a looming labour shortage persuaded even the more reluctant policy-makers and employers of the necessity of expanding the female labour supply. Hence, the employers found it difficult to argue against proposals to expand childcare services that soon appeared on the political agenda. In Finland, even agricultural parties had good reason to support the creation

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<sup>13</sup> Most notably, the Swedish social democrats Alva and Gunnar Myrdal created their utopia of the good society in the 1930s, emphasising the importance of social services that could – besides liberating women from housework – simultaneously support wage labour, gender equality, societal reproduction as well as welfare (Myrdal and Myrdal, 1935, cited in Anttonen and Sipilä, 2000:107; Leira, 2002:45).

of new care services as they would bring more work and prosperity to rural areas that were experiencing rapid depopulation (Anttonen and Sipilä, 2000:112).

Indeed, if economic development and labour market growth could be said to have set the stage for new family policies in the Nordic countries, it was the political *actors* who seized this opportunity and lobbied for specific initiatives. Ideologically, there was a shift towards the left in the composition of political decision-makers, with social democratic parties or social democratic-agrarian coalitions at the helm of power. Unsurprisingly then, left predominance is the most often-cited factor in the international social policy literature when explaining the evolution of Nordic care policy and Nordic welfare states in general.<sup>14</sup>

However, focusing on party politics can arguably provide only half the answer, if even that: Nordic writers themselves have provided strong arguments and evidence for the pivotal role of *women* as constituents of various political and activist groups rather than parties *per se*.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, women had a strong interest in contributing to the making of family policy due to its capacity to profoundly influence their lives as providers and consumers of care, and as workers. That they were able to promote their interests in practice was premised upon their strengthened position in the labour markets and politics from the 1960s onwards (Anttonen and Sipilä, 2000:111-112). In her analysis on the development of childcare in Finland, Tyyskä contends that new policies were essentially the outcome of ‘gendered power struggles’ that were played out over a long period of time and that comprised ‘continuous pressure from women’s organisations’ (Tyyskä, 1995:101). Leira asserts along similar lines that

from the 1970s, the feminist movement and mobilisation of women to political participation and representation in all levels of government helped to put women’s issues on the political agenda (Leira, 2006:32).

Indeed, it is clear that the promotion of gender equality on all levels of society evolved into a salient political objective in the Nordic countries over the final half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This has greatly contributed to the development of such core family policies as public childcare and parental leave schemes. To illustrate the comparatively high and steadily growing political presence of women in the Nordic

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Peng, 2002; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Huber and Stephens, (2001). Also see Svenson, 2002 for an alternative view that emphasises the positive contributions of employers to social policy development.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Anttonen and Sipilä, 2000:112; Tyyskä, 1995:18; Leira, 2006:32; Hernes, 1987:9-11.

countries, table 2.1 provides comparative data on women's inclusion in national parliaments between 1975 and 2006.

**Table 2.1. Percentage of seats occupied by women in lower or single houses of national parliaments, 1965-2006 (out of total number of seats).**

Ranking in 2006*	Country	1965 (1)	1975 (2)	1987 (3)	1997 (January) (4)	2006 (May) (5)
2	Sweden	8.6	21.4	28.5	40.4	45.3
4	Norway	8.0	15.5	34.4	39.4	37.9
5	Finland	14.0	23.0	31.5	33.5	37.5
6	Denmark	9.5	15.6	29.1	33.0	36.9
16	Germany	n/a	5.8 (West Germany)	15.4 (West Germany)	26.2	31.8
51	United Kingdom	n/a	4.3	6.3	9.5	19.7
102	Japan	n/a	1.4	1.4	4.6	9.0

Source: (1) Inter-Parliamentary Union (1995); (2) and (3): United Nations (1991); (4) and (5): Inter-Parliamentary Union (2006). \*Out of the 188 countries surveyed by the Inter-parliamentary Union, May 2006.

While a full account of Nordic welfare discourses is not possible here, the key arguments put forth in support of public childcare and 'woman-friendly' policies in the 1960s and 1970s in Scandinavia deserve to be noted. This paper agrees with Cox (2001) on the point that welfare state change has to always be *justified* in some way or another, and the most persuasive rhetorical reform strategies tend to utilise history, tradition and the recasting of old 'core values' in suitable ways (Cox, 2001:496). To be successful, new proposals must normally be connected to an 'existing value structure' (Cox, 2001:498). This point was well-understood by Nordic feminist and equality activists who made explicit reference to two highly resonant concepts: the universal right to work and democracy.

Work had traditionally occupied an elevated position among both agrarian and social democratic parties (that were in ascendancy in the 1960s) and their supporters. Against the backdrop of women's traditionally strong involvement in agricultural work, it was therefore a powerful strategy to argue that women, just as men, had an inalienable *right to work*. To fully realise this right in the new urbanised context, it was simply necessary to improve the care infrastructure (Anttonen and Sipilä, 2000:126).

The idea of democracy was the second major 'discursive tool' used in the promotion of gender equality in all realms. Nordic democracy would be expanded and strengthened through the integration of more women into not only the labour markets but also the formal political institutions. Indeed, gross under-representation of women

in political parties and the bureaucracies was framed as blatantly inconsistent with the full realisation of democracy (Sainsbury, 2004). Democracy enjoying the status of a core value in all of the Nordic polities, this line of argument proved particularly effective.

While the 1960s and 1970s were arguably the ‘formative period’ in terms of the developmental path and roots of Nordic family policy, consistent growth e.g. in childcare provision continued over the following decade, exhibiting considerable continuity at a time when for instance the Anglo-Saxon welfare states were under great pressure to undergo retrenchment. This growth only came to a halt with the strong recession of the early 1990s. However, despite some cutbacks and adjustments, analyses show that the essentials of Nordic family policy survived into the 2000s and possibly even strengthened as a result (Hiilamo, 2004:140-141). This demonstrates the high degree to which a comprehensive family policy has become institutionalised and entrenched in the Nordic countries, lending validity to speaking in terms of the ‘Nordic model’.

## 2.1. Childcare

Both dramatic social changes as well as strong political advocacy were necessary before comprehensive family policy could emerge in the Nordic countries. Public childcare policies demonstrate perhaps best the long and arduous nature of this process. Indeed, state provision of childcare in most of the Nordic countries remained incomplete well into the 1970s and 1980s, but by the early 2000s it had become a *de facto* social right (Leira, 2006:37).

In the case of Finland, the 1973 *Law on Childcare* was the first important milestone, setting the course from what had previously been a primarily means-tested, targeted service towards a genuinely universal one (Anttonen and Sipilä, 2000:129). The 1984 reforms (effective from 1990) made Finland the first country in the world to enshrine publicly funded day care (either at a day care centre or in family day care) as a right to be enjoyed by all parents of children under three years old. In 1996, this right was expanded to cover all parents of children below school age. However, despite progressive legislation, fewer Finnish children have used public childcare over the past 30 years compared to their peers in Denmark and Sweden. Clearly then, progress in family policy has been far from uniform in the Nordic countries. Table 2.2

illustrates some of the key national differences in the quantitative development of public childcare in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden between 1975 and 2002.

From this table we note first that Denmark has been the leader in terms of public childcare provision almost throughout the whole period, accommodating a particularly high proportion of the under three-year-olds. The variation in enrolment rates in the four countries is likely due to differences in the length and compensation of parental leave (Denmark offered a comparatively short period of leave until recently), the existence of alternatives (e.g. the home care allowance in Finland and a similar scheme in Norway that supports parents who wish to care for young children in the home beyond parental leave), economic downturns such as that in the early 1990s, and the intensity of efforts to improve the infrastructure. The most striking observation from this data is firstly the astonishing overall increase that has taken place in public childcare enrolment between the 1970s and 2002, and secondly the fact that growth has been a highly *gradual process* continuing throughout the whole period (with the exception of the mid-1990s when a severe recession was experienced). Indeed, *it took nearly 25 years until all of the Nordic countries had at least half of their pre-school children in public childcare* (Finland and Norway achieved this level in the late 1990s). Hence, a significant amount of time was needed until childcare could transform from a promise in national legislation to a substantial social right, guaranteed to the majority of the population in the spirit of universalism. It is vital to bear in mind this historical dimension when we later set out to examine the Japanese child care scheme that has become the object of expansionary reforms only very recently.

**Table 2.2. Nordic children in publicly funded childcare, 1975-2002 (as a percentage of children in the age group)**

Year	Age of child	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
1975	0-2	18	4	3	13
	3-6	27	9	6	19
1987	0-2	45	22	8	31
	3-6	65	52	50	79
1990	0-2	48	31	11	29
	3-6	73	58	57	64
	Total 0-6	61	44	33	48
1995	0-2	48	18	22	37
	3-6	83	55	61	74
	Total 0-6	68	39	44	59
2002	1-2	78	36	40	65
	3-5	94	67	82	91

Note: 'Publicly funded childcare' includes childcare centres and family day care.

Source: Leira, 2006:37.

## 2.2. Parental leave

Similarly to the development of child care, the Nordic countries did not move in perfect unison to reform their respective family leave schemes: Sweden was the clear forerunner, transforming its traditional maternity leave into paid parental leave available in principle to both parents in 1974. Finland and Norway followed suit in 1978, with Denmark eventually ‘joining the club’ in 1984 (Leira, 2005:37). To place these reforms into an international context, France instituted its compensated parental leave system in 1985; Germany in 1986; Canada in 1990; and Japan in 1994 (Core, 1995:18).<sup>16</sup> We can thus see that, in terms of timing at the very least, parental leave schemes were pioneered by the Nordic countries. As a result, it is reasonable to expect such schemes to be well-established in this region compared to most other welfare states.

Tables 2.3 and 2.4 present the major characteristics of statutory maternity and parental leave arrangements in the Nordic countries. It is clear that maternal and parental leave schemes can hardly be considered separately when conducting comparisons since some countries have combined these schemes into one (this is the case with Norway). Accordingly, to facilitate easier comparison, table 2.4 lists the approximate maximum combined lengths of maternity and parental leave schemes for which *earnings-related compensation* is paid. While leave days without compensation or with flat-rate compensation are by no means of negligible importance, the period for which earnings-related compensation is paid is considered more consequential to parents and is therefore chosen as the point of focus here (note that paternity leave days are not included in these figures).

It is apparent from table 2.3 that leave arrangements take various forms in the four Nordic states; for instance, maternity leave is conspicuously long in Denmark in relation to its parental leave scheme; Norway offers full wage compensation for those who opt for a shorter leave of 44 weeks; and Sweden boasts the longest total duration of leave with 480 days. However, there are also many striking commonalities: all offer comparatively long leaves between 44 to 56 weeks in duration with medium to high levels of wage compensation, and all are experiencing extremely high take-up

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<sup>16</sup> Notably among the industrialised nations, the United States has yet to introduce a compensated parental leave scheme.

rates, ranging between 85 percent in the case of Denmark and virtually full take-up in Finland, Norway and Sweden (Core, 1995).

**Table 2.3. Statutory maternity and parental leave arrangements for parents in the Nordic countries as of 2005.**

Country	Maternity leave	Parental leave	
	Length	Length	Compensation
<b>Denmark</b>	18 weeks	32 weeks (to be shared between parents)	90% for 32 weeks (80% of parents receive full pay for up to 24 weeks after birth under unemployment benefit scheme)
<b>Finland</b>	105 weekdays (Monday-Saturday)	158 weekdays (Monday-Saturday)	43%-82% of earnings (average 66%), nearly half of mothers with employment contract receive full pay due to employer supplements
<b>Norway</b>	9 weeks (3 before and 6 after birth)	44 weeks at 100% of wages or 54 weeks at 80% (includes 9 weeks of maternity leave and a 6 weeks' daddy quota) plus a year of unpaid leave	100% for 44 weeks or 80% for 54 weeks (to be chosen by parents)
<b>Sweden</b>	60 days (part of parental leave)	480 days	390 out of 480 days paid at sickness benefit level (80%) or at basic benefit level (180 SEK per day), remaining 90 days paid at minimum benefit level (60 SEK per day)

Source: Ellingsaeter and Leira, 2006:19-23 (Appendix).

**Table 2.4. Combined maximum length of maternity and parental leave for which earnings-related compensation is receivable.**

<b>Denmark</b>	50 weeks
<b>Finland</b>	Approx. 44 weeks
<b>Norway</b>	54 weeks
<b>Sweden</b>	Approx. 56 weeks



This evidence testifies to the strong institutionalisation and acceptance of both the maternity and parental leave schemes by employees as well as employers.<sup>17</sup> Table 2.5 provides comparative data on women's labour market participation, suggesting that Nordic parental leave and childcare schemes positively impact on participation rates.

**Table 2.5. Key indicators on female labour force participation in the Nordic countries as of 2004.**

	Labour force participation rates (%)	Part-time employment (as a percentage of total employment)
<b>Denmark</b>	76.1	24.3
<b>Finland</b>	72.0	15.0
<b>Norway</b>	75.7	33.2
<b>Sweden</b>	76.6	20.8
<b>Japan</b>	60.2 %	41.7

Source: OECD (2005b).

It should be noted that in addition to the above characteristics, Nordic policy also recognises fathers as carers through allowing them to take statutory leave to care for their young children (Leira, 2002:75). This trend has slowly strengthened from the 1970s onwards and the conceptual norm is tending towards the 'dual breadwinner – dual carer' model. Male take-up of paternity and parental leave is relatively high in Norway, Sweden and Finland, and this trend towards more 'fathercare' has recently been promoted by the instigation of the so-called 'daddy quota' and 'daddy months' in Norway and Sweden respectively (Leira, 2002:86). Still, this does of course not imply that the actual average number of days that fathers spend on parental leave equals the number of leave days that mothers use.

### 2.3 Defining the model

Considerable diversity thus exists among the Nordic countries regarding key family policies such as childcare and parental leave. Not surprisingly, then, some scholars take the position that three or even four different models co-exist in the Nordic region,

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<sup>17</sup> However, it is possible that among other factors, the high occupation segregation occurring in the Nordic countries plays a role in making it easier for women – who still form the overwhelming majority of leave-takers despite some success in the promotion of more 'fathercare' – to take significant periods of time off and make use of formal leave schemes.

or alternatively that one or two of the countries fall outside the Scandinavian mould.<sup>18</sup> However, for the purposes of this study, we are interested in defining the ‘Nordic model’ of family policy in a ‘smallest common denominator’ fashion, that is, on the basis of the minimum features that are shared between the child care and parental leave schemes of the four Nordic countries.

In empirical terms, we saw how public child care enrolment rates grew at varying rates from a low baseline in the 1970s to at least 50 percent in each country by the late 1990s (table 2.2). Ideologically, universalism has been the common underlying principle: the long-held goal in the Nordic countries was childcare provision to all who need it *as a matter of right*. While comparatively less children are in public childcare in Finland, its welfare state still adheres to the same logic of universal childcare provision in that guaranteed childcare services are given priority; the entitlement to the chief alternative, homecare allowance, is based on the family *not* utilising municipally provided childcare.<sup>19</sup>

Table 2.4 captured the core similarities in parental leave legislation in the Nordic countries, showing that all offer relatively long leaves of 44 to 56 weeks, with earnings-related compensation paid at rates ranging from an average of 66 to 100 percent. We also saw how high take-up of parental leave by women as well as their high labour force participation rates gave further indication of the strong entrenchment of a comprehensive family policy system. Furthermore, we found that paternity leave and father’s quota schemes support, though to a limited extent, the participation of men in caring for young family members in these countries.

In a considerably condensed form then, we are able to define the ‘Nordic model’ of family policy as one that comprises formal public childcare provision as a universal right of all parents with pre-school children and that offers compensated alternatives to those you do not make use of such services; allows working parents to take leave from work for roughly a year with earnings-related compensation of around two-thirds or more of prior salary; and provides special (if limited) incentives to increase male take-up of parental leave.

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<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Bruning and Platenga, 1999 for an example of the first argument.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2006).

### 3. Japan's 'First Decade of Family Policy' ?

Having reviewed and defined the 'Nordic model' of family policy, we now turn to the relevant developments in Japan in the period from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, focusing similarly on formal childcare and parental leave policies.

As implied in the introduction, Japan hardly had anything resembling a comprehensive family policy in the Western (or Nordic) sense prior to the 1990s. However, some scholars have in hindsight suggested that many company welfare schemes that remained widespread until the late 1980s were indeed quite 'family-friendly' in a uniquely Japanese way.<sup>20</sup> The basic assumption upon which this type of family support systems were built on was the male breadwinner – female caregiver model that prescribed a strict gender-based division of labour: men, as 'company warriors', dedicated themselves whole-heartedly to their employers, often for their entire working lives, while women were expected to display equal dedication in serving their (extended) families. In exchange for their hard work, married male workers received spousal, child and housing allowances of varying levels of generosity. Meanwhile, the government strove to keep its welfare role limited, focusing on health and pensions, offering assistance to families only under exceptional circumstances and based on stringent means-testing.<sup>21</sup> It could be said that as long as stable employment conditions and economic growth continued, this approach to family policy worked very well, especially from the point of view of the married (male) members of the middle-class who were attached to large and wealthy corporations.

Despite efforts by the government to sustain this state of affairs, by the early 1990s, the circumstances had transformed so dramatically that this was simply no longer possible. The composition of families had changed: they had become smaller; there were fewer three-generational families; and marriages were taking place later, if at all (Rebick and Takenaka, 2006:7). Importantly, more women had started to work

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<sup>20</sup> See Nakamura, 2002:160-163. The Japanese term that she uses is *Nihongata famirī-furendorī seisaku* (Japanese-style family-friendly policy), a twist on the term *Nihongata fukushi shakai* (Japanese-style welfare society) employed during the period of welfare retrenchment in Japan from the late 1970s to the 1980s.

<sup>21</sup> The general bias in favour of the elderly is evident in expenditure data that show Japan spent 5.5 times more on the welfare of the elderly than it did on that of other age groups in 1993, whereas the corresponding ratio for Nordic countries was 0.6 to 0.9 (Tsumura, 2002:43).

and prioritise their careers over family life, leading the female labour market participation rate for those aged 20 to 64 to rise from 51.7 percent in 1975 to 63.8 percent in 2002.<sup>22</sup> These trends have been accompanied by changes in popular opinion captured by value surveys: while the vast majority of Japanese people still agreed in the 1990s with the notion that ‘husbands should work outside the home while wives should look after the family’, by 2002 those who found such a statement disagreeable had taken the lead (Gender Equality Bureau, 2005).

What inevitably resulted was a considerable reduction in the family’s willingness and capacity to provide care, leading eventually to what Peng (2005) refers to as the *public crisis of the family*. That is, families began to collapse under the excessive burdens from elderly and child care as well as the need to accommodate single adults in their 20s and 30s who continue to cohabit with, and sometimes financially depend on, their ageing parents (Peng, 2005:74).<sup>23</sup> What made this crisis even more ‘public’ were its significant demographic implications: the total fertility rate had been on a steady decline since the 1970s, falling below replacement level in 1975 and leading in 1990 to the so-called ‘1.57 shock’ that was widely noted among political circles as well as among the citizenry (due to active promotion of the issue by the government and media).<sup>24</sup> With persistently low fertility, statistics showed that Japan’s population began to decline in 2005, and in 2006 it was the world’s most aged nation with approximately 21 percent of its population aged 65 and over.<sup>25</sup>

In the early 1990s – at the beginning of what this study suggests could be seen as Japan’s ‘first decade of state-led family policy’ – the government initially reacted to this situation through organising a series of inter-ministerial meetings that led to early reforms such as the relaxing of child allowance eligibility conditions, the

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<sup>22</sup> However, it should be kept in mind that this increase has been due overwhelmingly to the rising number of non-regular workers (see Ōsawa, 2005:119). The labour market participation rates cited here are calculated based on figures provided in table 19-5 (Labour Force and Labour Force Participation Rate by Age Group and Sex, 1948-2002) of Historical Statistics of Japan, Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> These single adults who opt to stay with their parents have often been referred to as ‘parasite singles’ after the publication of a book titled the Era of the Parasite Single (*Parasaito shinguru no jidai*) by Masahiro Yamada in 1999. The present author, however, finds this term misleading (as it implies that it is mainly the youth who are to ‘blame’ for this phenomenon) and discriminatory in its connotations, and discourages its unqualified use.

<sup>24</sup> This was the lowest-ever recorded total fertility rate in Japan. The previously lowest rate (1.58) was recorded in 1966, the year of the fire horse that occurs every 60 years in the zodiac calendar. A superstitious belief held that girls born this year would be destined to kill their husbands (MHW, 1997:130).

<sup>25</sup> Yomiuri Shinbun, 30 June 2006.

signing into law of the parental leave scheme, and the enactment of the so-called Angel Plan meant to improve the child-rearing environment in Japan. The Ministry of Health and Welfare's (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, or MHLW, from 2001) yearly white paper afforded abundant attention to the developments, with low fertility, child-rearing support and the ageing society featuring as the main themes in 1992, 1994 and 1998, respectively (Cabinet Office, 2005:106). In 2005, the Cabinet Office began publishing an annual white paper dedicated solely to the issue of declining fertility called *Shōshika Shakai Hakusho* (literally, white paper on 'declining-fertility society'), signalling the heightened importance ascribed to the issue. The compiling of this white paper – that reports on the latest developments in fertility and the government's responses – is one of the requirements under the Basic Law on Countermeasures against Declining Fertility (*Shōshika shakai taisaku kihon hō*) that came into force in 2003. The key aim of this law is the 'creation of an environment that allows citizens to dream of having a family and raising children, and that makes it possible to securely give birth to, and raise, the children that will support the future society'.<sup>26</sup>

In light of these developments, it seems warranted to argue that demographic trends (intimately linked to the 'crisis of the family') have been a leading cause behind the drive towards a more comprehensive, government-led family policy as well as gender equality measures in Japan.<sup>27</sup> A recent report by the OECD (2003) on reconciling work and family life agrees with this account, stating that 'today, low birth rates are the overriding family policy concern' in Japan (OECD, 2003:116).<sup>28</sup> This has in many ways led to a very unusual situation, not least because the long-ruling *conservative* Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (*Jiyū Minshutō*) is now a chief proponent of generous family policies and gender equality.

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<sup>26</sup> Cabinet Office, 2005, introductory address by Nanno Chieko. Translated by the present author.

<sup>27</sup> Ōsawa posits that 'delayed marriage and low fertility rates are associated with gender inequality in Japan' (Ōsawa, 2004:74). This is mostly related to the expectation that women leave the labour force and become full-time carers around child-birth while their husbands work extremely long days. This responsibility has come to be understood by women as a burden that can be managed by marrying later or not at all, and by having fewer or no children.

<sup>28</sup> The 2005 white paper on declining fertility (*Shōshika Shakai Hakusho*) emphasises the importance of achieving a significant boost in fertility through various measures by the year 2010 as the intervening five-year period represents a precious 'window of opportunity' from the point of view of Japan's population size and structure. After 2010, the cohorts of women born during the 'second baby boom' (1971-1974) will move beyond their prime child-bearing years, resulting in a precipitous drop in the total number of women likely to bear children (Cabinet Office, 2005:92-93).

While Japanese women are now less excluded from political decision-making than before (as shown in table 2.1, their share of lower house seats was 9.0 in 2006, and recently more women have been appointed for deliberative councils as well), the new family policy reforms can hardly be seen as a result of direct and sustained pressure from female politicians or women's groups.<sup>29</sup> Peng suggests that in Japan, gender equality has been promoted as a means rather than as an end in and of itself (Peng, 2002:435). This further suggests female influence over policy development has been limited.

Hence, at this stage, it is possible to view the recent expansionary reforms as a largely *utilitarian project* by a predominantly male state machinery to rejuvenate Japan's birth rate and increase labour market participation, and to thereby sustain the social security system and economic growth. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that the reform drive has not been contributed to, and to some extent co-opted by, feminist groups and female politicians.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, regardless of the underlying reasons for reform, it is imperative to look at their actual contents and outcomes. The following sections will examine developments in childcare and parental leave schemes in the early 1990s and 2000s, based on which a limited comparison between Japanese and Nordic family policy is carried out in Section 4.

### 3.1. Childcare

From the end of the Second World War up to the early 1990s, caring for small children in Japan was seen strictly as a private duty to be performed by the mother in the home with minimal interference or economic assistance from public authorities. The full-time housewife (or the part-time working mother) as the primary provider of such care was the norm throughout this period, enforced as it was through the belief that infants must be raised at home until their third birthday for developmental reasons

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<sup>29</sup> Weathers' (2004) observation that the Japanese women's movement has been highly scattered, rarely lobbying for changes in the prevailing gender relations but rather for other causes such as consumer rights, supports this account (Weathers, 2004:429).

<sup>30</sup> See Ōsawa, 2000 on the progress made by the government-appointed Council for Gender Equality and on the promotion of gender equality for the sake of economic efficiency and demographic sustainability.

and through the lack of genuine alternatives.<sup>31</sup> While infant childcare was implemented in 1969 as a special measure targeted at families where both parents had no choice but to work to maintain their livelihoods, the Central Child Welfare Council affirmed the above traditional approach to child-rearing in its Recommendations published in 1968, stating that ‘it must be a principle that infants and toddlers under three years of age are raised at home’ and ‘it is because of the continuous one-to-one relationship between mother and child that we can expect the stable emotional development of infants’ (MHW, 1997:129). The primacy of families and thus mothers as care-providers was re-emphasised through political rhetoric during a period of welfare retrenchment from the late 1970s to the 1980s under the banners of ‘rethinking welfare’ (*fukushi no minaoshi*) and ‘Japanese-style welfare society’ (*nihongata fukushi shakai*).<sup>32</sup>

This state of affairs began to change from the late 1980s and early 1990s onwards. One of the most remarkable initiatives that signified this change was the so-called Angel Plan, or the Basic Direction for Future Child Rearing Support Measures. This plan was formulated in 1994 based on an agreement of four ministries and carried out between 1995 and 1999. The most comprehensive governmental measure to improve the child-rearing environment in Japan to date, Angel Plan was rather revolutionary in terms of its explicit acknowledgement that caring for children was no longer a solely private duty of families: the national government, local administrations as well as companies now also had a role to play in providing support. Unsurprisingly, however, this did not mark a complete 180-degree turn in policy as more conventional views regarding the desirable allocation of childcare duties continued to coexist alongside newer ideas.<sup>33</sup> In any case, the reform drive continued with Angel Plan II in 1999 aiming to further speed up the improvement of Japan’s childcare infrastructure.

To grasp the impact of these reforms, let us first examine relevant quantitative outcome indicators. In terms of sheer volume, we find that the total number of childcare facilities (*hoikusho*) in fact declined from 22,526 in 1994 – the

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<sup>31</sup> Well-paying career options were more or less closed to women until the 1980s as there was an ample supply of male workers in cities thanks to migration from rural areas (Schoppa, 2006:76). Thus there was little need to accommodate working mothers through public child care services. It was of course likely that some child care duties were delegated to the grand parents in many families, enabling many urban mothers to take up part-time work.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Harada, 1998:198-199; Peng, 2005:80-81; Shō, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> We find that the text for the Angel Plan makes concessions to traditional thinking, stating for instance that child-rearing is still *essentially* to be conducted in the family (Cabinet Office, 2005:94, translation and emphasis by the present author).

year before the first Angel Plan was executed – to 22,490 in 2004 when the second plan had nearly run its course (MHW, 1997:130; MHLW, 2006:228). Nevertheless, the ratio of facilities *per children* did increase slightly due to a dramatic decrease in the size of the relevant population so that the number of facilities rose from roughly 3.1 per 1000 children aged between 0 and 6 in 1994 to 3.3 per 1000. More importantly, the actual number of children making use of formal childcare services increased significantly over the same period, from 1.6 million to slightly below 2 million (OECD, 2003:143; Cabinet Office, 2005:125). As a result, the total childcare enrolment rate of those aged below six rose from roughly 22 percent to 29 percent over this ten-year period.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of improvements in capacity and a decrease in the number of young children, waiting lists are still relatively long: government figures show there were as many as 24,245 children queuing for a childcare place as of April 2004 (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2005:125). Table 3.1 illustrates the situation.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 3.1. Number of children aged 0-5 in formal childcare and on waiting lists in 2004.**

Age group (1)	Number of children in childcare (2)	Children in childcare as percentage of age-group (3)	Children on waiting list (4)	Population per age group (5)
0	76,436	6.8	2,417 (10.0)	1,118,000
1-2	541,739	23.7	14,029 (57.8)	2,282,000
0-2	618,175	18.2	16,446 (67.8)	3,400,000
3-5	1,348,754	38.5	7,799 (32.2)	3,504,000
Total	1,966,929	28.5	24,245 (100.0)	6,904,000

Sources: (2) and (4) adopted from Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2005:125, (5) from Statistical Training Institute (2006). (3) is calculated based on (2) and (5).

This table reveals a bulge in the number of children on a waiting list for children aged one to two years, i.e. the period immediately after the statutory and parental leave (for those parents who make use of it). Together with the relatively low

<sup>34</sup> The relevant populations were approximately 7.3 million (1994) and 6.9 million (2004). The figure for 1994 is an estimate based on the population statistics for 1995 provided by the Statistics Bureau of Japan (2002) while the figure for 2004 is based on the population statistics for the same year published by the Statistical Training Institute (2006).

<sup>35</sup> It should be added that the waiting list figures provided by the government are unlikely to reflect the true level of unmet demand for childcare as a significant part of this may be 'hidden' due to for instance parents being discouraged from applying for a place due to long waiting times and the limited number of licensed childcare facilities (OECD, 2003:143). The figures may of course also be inflated in case parents are able to apply for several child care facilities simultaneously.



proportion of children aged one to two in formal childcare (23.7 percent), this raises questions about the continuity between childcare provision and the parental leave scheme. We also find that a fairly modest proportion of children under three years of age (18 percent) attended childcare in 2004, indicating that other solutions were relied on in the majority of cases. For the age-group 3-5, we find childcare attendance is moderate at 38.5 percent. However, if we add those enrolled at pre-school kindergartens (*yōchien*), the attendance rate for this age group jumps significantly to 89 percent, bringing the total enrolment rate for all pre-school children to 54 percent (OECD, 2003:139).<sup>36</sup>

Although it is not possible to deliver a full review of the qualitative aspects of childcare in Japan here, it is informative to briefly discuss the eligibility conditions attached to childcare services. Firstly, while specific conditions vary between cities and towns, eligibility for a childcare place is still fairly limited and usually based on the three-fold criteria of residence, both parents' full-time employment, and the absence of relatives capable of delivering care. For example, the town of Miyakonojō of Miyazaki prefecture states on its website that 'admittance to a childcare centre is not possible based on reasons such as the desire to provide one's child with early childhood education or to accustom him or her to living in groups'.<sup>37</sup> What has changed compared to the 1980s is the fact that access to formal childcare is no longer limited to families where both parents, including the mother, *have* to work due to insufficient income; it is now enough that both parents merely work, whether out of their own volition or out of pressing economic necessity. And, to be sure, the government has included the diversification of available childcare as one of its objectives, aiming to expand the supply of extended-hours care, overnight and holiday care, as well as temporary 'relief-care' (*ikuji tsukare kaishō*) for exhausted housewives (MHLW, 2006:228).

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<sup>36</sup> It should be kept in mind though that traditionally, *yōchien* have provided teaching only until early afternoon. However, an increasing number of them now offer afternoon care (*yōchien azukari hoiku*).

<sup>37</sup> See Town of Miyakonojō, 'hoikusho nyūjo tetsuzuki' (Childcare centre entrance procedures) at <http://www.city.miyakonojo.miyazaki.jp/tc/kurashi/kodomo/hoikunyusho.jsp> (accessed on 5 August 2006). Translated by the present author.

### 3.1. Parental leave

Japan's first parental leave law that allows one of the parents to take leave for ten months following the 14-week maternity leave came into force in 1992 (with a three-year grace period for companies with less than 30 workers). This leave was unpaid at first, but from 1995 onwards leave-takers could receive 25 percent of their previous monthly wages through the employment insurance scheme. In 2001, the level of compensation was further raised to 40 percent at which it remains at the end of fiscal 2006. The take-up rates for eligible mothers have risen from less than 50 percent in mid-nineties to 64.0 percent in 2002, while take-up by fathers has remained below one percent (MHLW, 2005:144-145). Table 3.2 summarises the recent parental leave legislation.

Although a glance at this data would suggest that Japan has made remarkable progress regarding parental leave legislation over a relatively short period of time, boasting a moderately high nominal take-up rate (by mothers), closer scrutiny leads us to a slightly more cautious conclusion. First, around 70 percent of pregnant mothers still withdraw from the labour force around childbirth (OECD, 2003:88). It is likely that the majority of women belonging to this 70 percent are simply *ineligible* for paid parental leave by virtue of their status as 'irregular workers' – a category which now

**Table 3.2. Development of statutory parental leave in Japan, 1992-2001.**

Year*	Legislation (1)	Compensation (2)	Maximum duration of leave (3)	Eligibility (4)
1992	Parental leave law implemented	None	10 months	Full-time work for at least 12 months over the last two years prior to taking leave. Ineligible workers include 1) those employed on a day-to-day basis; 2) those on a fixed-term contract; 3) those who have worked for the same employer for less than a year; 4) workers whose spouse is not in work or works very little; 5) workers who are considered 'rationally' as not eligible for child care leave such as those working for no more than two days per week.
1995	Compensation level raised	25%	10 months	
1997	Parental leave enforced on all (including small) companies	25%	10 months	
2001	Compensation level raised	40%	10 months, three years for government employees	

Source: (1)-(3) OECD, 2003:130; (4) MHW, 1997:133; OECD, 2003:164.

\*Year the legislation came into force.

now makes up approximately half of the total female work force.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the official take-up rate (that was 64 percent in 2002) is based on roughly one third of the total number of female workers who *could* be eligible under more inclusive conditions. By way of an estimate based on the above figures then, *less than one fifth* of all female workers who bear children are able to make use of statutory parental leave in practice. This reality stands in stark contrast with the Nordic countries where, unlike Japan, the overwhelming majority of women do not resign from their jobs around child-birth.

The parental leave scheme is included in the government's overall strategy for countering low fertility as declared in its 2003 policy regarding measures to support the nurturing of the next generation (*Jisedai ikusei shien ni kan suru tōmen no torikumi hōshin*). Reaching parental leave take-up rates of 80 percent for mothers and 10 percent for fathers are the numerical targets specified by this policy (MHLW, 2005:144-145). In this new plan, the government also acknowledged the need to reassess the prevalent working habits in Japan, including those of men (*dansei wo fukumeta hatarakikata no minaoshi*). This is based on the realisation that a long working hours culture tends to compromise family life and child-bearing, especially now that the share of dual-income families (*tomobataraki katei*) is increasing.<sup>39</sup>

While these reforms are a step forward from the point of view of improving conditions for family life and gender equality, they are unlikely to prove very effective without complementary changes in labour market regulation, particularly with regard to women's employment conditions. Also, new ways to tackle indirect discrimination against women connected to their child-bearing role in private companies have to be implemented before it will become possible for the parental leave scheme to become firmly established and trusted by its potential users.

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<sup>38</sup> According to OECD data, 47.1 percent of Japanese women belonged to the non-regular category (that includes part-timers, agency temporary workers, short-hours part-time work usually referred to as *arubaito*, and fixed term contract workers) in 2001 (OECD, 2003:80). However, higher figures have been cited by e.g. Weathers (2005) who states that depending on the source, as many as 49.2 percent or 55 percent of employed women are non-regular compared with 15 percent for men (Weathers, 2005:69). Roughly 40 percent of all temporary workers are young people and about 25% of young people are on temporary contracts, reflecting the changed employment conditions that new labour market entrants face in Japan (OECD, 2005b).

<sup>39</sup> While the standard working week in Japan is 40 hours, actual figures are higher: almost two thirds of prime-age Japanese male workers put in more than 42 hours per week, while 20 percent work 60 hours or more (OECD, 2003:70). Although there are many women who also do frequent overtime work, long working hours tends to be much more a male than a female occurrence. This is both a cause and a consequence of the current employment practices in Japan whereby males constitute the overwhelming majority of full-time core workers while women are comparatively more often on part-time or fixed-term contracts as noted in footnote 38.

Furthermore, if take-up rates by fathers are to be improved, it is vital that the parental leave scheme be made shareable between both of the parents as flexibly as possible.

#### **4. Contrasting the two approaches: On what level are Japanese policies ‘Nordic’?**

Sections 2 and 3 above reviewed both the ‘Nordic model’ of family policy and recent childcare and parental leave reforms in Japan. We saw how Nordic and Japanese policies evolved in sharply contrasting political and social contexts, promoted by diverging sets of actors and discourses. This chapter will first examine the extent to which Japanese family policies have begun to ‘turn Nordic’ based on the accounts provided in the previous two sections. Secondly, it will consider whether analysing discourses, women’s political influence and demographic characteristics could yield valuable explanations regarding differences in family policy development.

Arguably, the clearest step that Japan has taken so far towards a Nordic-style family policy was the establishment of its new parental leave system in 1992 and its upgrading into a compensatory scheme in 1995. With the level of compensation at 40 percent of previous earnings in fiscal 2006, and maximum duration of leave at 10 months (or 13 months if combined with maternity leave), this is no longer a policy drastically different from the parental leave schemes in the Nordic countries. Although compensation levels in Scandinavia are still more generous – ranging from two thirds of prior salary to full compensation – it is not inconceivable that a gradual upgrading of the Japanese scheme could bring it up to Nordic levels in the near-term future. Also, it would not seem very difficult to make parental leave shareable between both parents, at least in principle, although increasing take-up by fathers could prove a challenging and slow process.

However, as we saw in Section 4, the real problem with Japan’s parental leave scheme has to do with the attendant eligibility rules given the labour market conditions women are facing currently. With roughly half of the female workforce employed as ‘irregular workers’ – a category of employees ineligible for parental leave – the significance of the scheme declines dramatically.<sup>40</sup> Hence, although the

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<sup>40</sup> Also, indirect discrimination by, or reluctant attitudes on behalf of employers may still play a role in discouraging even the formally qualified women from applying for extended parental leave.

majority of women still indicate they plan to quit work to bear and raise children and roughly 70 percent of them actually do so (Rebick and Takenaka, 2006:14; OECD, 2003:88), this can hardly be dismissed merely as a Japanese cultural idiosyncrasy. Rather, based on the evidence presented in this article, it is reasonable to argue that this reflects a lack of genuine, well-established alternatives, as well as women's relatively precarious position in the labour market. If the parental leave scheme is to be made more effective, considerable attention has to be afforded to reforming labour market conditions; that is, reducing the share of women working as 'irregulars'. The other possible solution would be to significantly relax the eligibility conditions of parental leave so that even part-timers and temporary workers could apply for it provided they had worked for a sufficiently (but not prohibitively) long period prior to taking leave. In sum then, while the current Japanese parental leave policy *per se* is not very dissimilar to Nordic policies in terms of duration and level of compensation, its *outcomes* currently differ considerably with what we see in the Nordic countries.

Section 3 also showed how taking care of young children transformed from a solely private responsibility into at least a partially public duty in Japan in the 1990s. The state made a major break with its past 'Japanese-style welfare society' rhetoric (that had emphasised the role of family as the prime caregiver) by recognising the need for various other important institutions – including companies and the state itself – to support families with child-rearing (Cabinet Office, 2005:94). However, although it introduced a plan to reduce the number of children on childcare waiting lists to zero in 2001, the government has so far refrained from making an explicit promise to *guarantee* formal childcare to all who need it. Furthermore, never has access to childcare services in Japan been framed as constituting a *social right* to be enjoyed by all citizens (and residents) as has been done in the Nordic countries.<sup>41</sup> Hence, the ideological underpinnings of child care in Japan and the Nordic countries appear quite dissimilar currently.

In terms of sheer enrolment rates, the distance between the Nordic and Japanese 'models' of child care does not seem great at first glance, especially if we consider high kindergarten attendance in Japan. Indeed, if those in pre-school education are included, the enrolment rates of children in the age-group three to five appear virtually identical in Japan and the Nordic countries. Of course, to properly

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<sup>41</sup> The notion of social rights, to be sure, has been very weak in Japanese political culture despite the constitution including a section that essentially affirms the existence of such rights.

determine whether these figures reflect similar realities for instance from the point of view of mothers' employment, we would have to examine and compare the number of hours children are typically taught and cared for in kindergartens daily.<sup>42</sup>

Clearer differences emerge when we focus on the enrolment rates for children aged one to two; here, the Nordic countries are still considerably ahead of Japan with a minimum of 36 percent of the age-group attending formal childcare in 2002 compared to roughly 24 percent in Japan in 2004.<sup>43</sup> This has implications for parents' job security and suggests that in the majority of cases, mothers must remain at home to care for the very young or seek informal care services for example from their relatives, for example. Hence, we can summarise by saying that childcare in Japan has moved towards the Nordic system in the sense that a measure of public responsibility for the care of young children has been recognised; however, child care has not been guaranteed to all as a matter of *right* in Japan, its system lacks continuity vis-à-vis the Nordic schemes and is still considerably less comprehensive.

#### **4.1 Differences in discourse, women's political influence and demographics**

This section will briefly review potentially useful explanations for major differences in the development of family policy in the Nordic countries and Japan. Although it is impossible to account for the whole range of contextual factors relevant to the evolution of family policies such as public childcare and parental leave schemes here, three that are considered particularly relevant will be examined below: discourse, women's political influence, and demographics.

As we saw above, various discourses have been used to attract support for welfare reforms in the Nordic countries and Japan. In the former, childcare advocates, for instance, successfully exploited values such as democracy and the right to work and portrayed expansion in family services as a natural extension of these well-

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<sup>42</sup> As working long hours is still a prevalent practice in Japan even among parents of young children, providing extended-hours childcare is an important consideration. Government data shows that 13,100 out of a total of 22,490 centres were indeed providing such care in 2004 (Cabinet Office, 2005:126).

<sup>43</sup> Moreover, whereas the Nordic country with the lowest number of very young children in formal childcare, Finland, offers an alternative scheme under the name of home care support that allows for a total of three years' compensated leave with the guaranteed right to return to one's previous job, Japan boasts no comparable option. See <http://pre20031103.stm.fi/english/pao/publicat/childcare/section1.htm> (the website of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health of Finland) for more information on this scheme in English. Norway, too, has a similar system in place.

established values. Meanwhile, although the 1980s discourse in Japan emphasised the centrality of the family on the basis of traditional values and the ‘Japanese-style welfare society’, we found that there was a marked break away from this rhetoric in the early 1990s. More than arguments for greater gender equality, we saw how the declining birth rate and its perceived negative demographic consequences were used to justify an expansion in public responsibility over supporting the family. While to an extent the demographic developments have generated a beneficial ‘shock effect’, the obvious weakness here in terms of discourse is the lack of continuity between arguments made in the 1980s and those in the 1990s. Hence, it is likely to prove very hard to create a strong consensus behind new family policy measures that appear at odds with what are perceived as ‘traditional’ Japanese values. Against this backdrop, the government may be right in prioritising utilitarian justifications for family policy reform, although this strategy risks alienating women.

Section 2 highlighted the role that women as a group played in realising family policy reforms in the Nordic countries in the 1960s and the 1970s. We saw that Nordic women made up a significant share of their respective parliaments as early as the mid-1970s – the formative period of many important family policies – whereas the political participation of Japanese women remained consistently weak until the 1990s and is still comparatively low.<sup>44</sup> While it would be simplistic to draw a direct causal link between female representation and generous family policies, high representation *along with* other characteristics such as a view of the state as a site of social justice, its responsiveness to demands for equality, and the strength of feminist organisations that challenge existing gender relations have been found to increase the likelihood of having more ‘female-friendly’ policies (Stetson and Mazur, 1995:290). With a low representation of women in political bodies, a lack of female business leaders and a fragmented women’s movement, the preconditions for ‘state feminism’ in the Nordic sense seem far from robust in Japan.<sup>45</sup>

Arguably, one of the most relevant contextual factors regarding the expansion of family policy in Japan has to do with demographics – not only with the

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<sup>44</sup> The UNDP’s Human Development Report for 2002 ranked Japan 44<sup>th</sup> among 70 countries in terms of its gender empowerment measure (United Nations Development Programme, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> At present however, a positive trend in women’s political participation rates is discernible – not only within political parties but also in the government’s key deliberative councils (*shingikai*). The average female membership of the government’s deliberative councils stood at 24.7 percent in 2001, whereas in 1980 women had constituted a mere 4.1 percent of such councils (Cabinet Office, 2002:27).

low birth rate *per se*, but with ageing as well. As Section 3 pointed out, Japan's social spending has been conspicuously skewed in favour the elderly: In 2003, 70.4 percent of social security expenditure was directed towards those aged 65 and over (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2006:7). Added to this important feature and the associated burdens, Japan's economy has grown at low rates since the early 1990s, with the government accumulating considerable debts. A great emphasis on budgetary restraint has not been conducive to introducing expensive family policies, and this situation is unlikely to change as ageing proceeds.

However, we must bear in mind that demographic change has not only led to growing ranks of the elderly, but also to a rapid shrinking of the population aged under 15, from 27.5 million in 1980 to just under 18 million in 2003. This has meant that while there has not been a significant increase in the share of social expenditure allocated to families, expenditures per child have nearly quadrupled in this period while total social expenditures have grown by roughly 350 percent (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2006:10; see Appendix B). Hence, with smaller cohorts of children, it should be possible to gradually enhance the generosity of benefits to families without increasing the *share* of total social expenditure directed to this purpose.

Be that as it may, compared to the situation in the Nordic countries whose populations were still comparatively young in the 1960s and 1970s, Japan currently faces significant burdens from its aged population and tight budgetary conditions which makes establishing truly comprehensive Nordic-style family policies particularly difficult, regardless of an apparently growing interest in such policies. Ōsawa's (2000) remarks reflect this strained state of affairs, noting that while the government has made great conceptual progress by recognising the importance of gender equality and associated policies to the future vitality of the Japanese society, 'these advances have seldom been accompanied by any willingness to back new ideas with money' (Ōsawa, 2000:18).

## 5. Conclusion

This article has covered a lot of ground, including the development of family policy in the Nordic countries and Japan as well as potential explanations for significant



differences in such development.<sup>46</sup> By no means has an exhaustive account been provided; focus was intentionally limited to trends in formal child care and parental leave policies while contextual factors were explored but briefly. Nevertheless, this study has succeeded in providing us with tentative answers to the main research question – that is, to what extent the recent Japanese family policies exhibit ‘Nordic shades’.

The key finding regarding child care is that Japan has indeed moved closer to the Nordic countries in the sense that public responsibility for the care of young children is now recognised. However, child care has not been guaranteed as a matter of *right*, the system lacks continuity compared to the Nordic schemes and is significantly less comprehensive. With regards to parental leave, we discovered that while the current Japanese parental leave scheme itself is not markedly different from Nordic policies in terms of duration and wage compensation level, its stringent eligibility conditions, combined with the high percentage of ‘irregular’ female workers, causes the policy’s outcomes to differ considerably. Hence, it could be said that the outlines of Nordic-style family policy have emerged in Japan, but their effectiveness has been curtailed by insufficient provision (for instance of child care for children aged one to two) and out-of-sync labour market realities (such as long working hours and the high number of female irregular workers).

Furthermore, it was thought that examining not just the concrete policies but also the relevant *contexts* would highlight crucial factors that have guided the development of Nordic and Japanese family policies and account for major differences between them. The study drew attention to discourse, women’s political influence, and demographic factors as promising explanatory variables meriting further research. In short, we found that while Nordic discourse on family policy drew heavily on the older core values of democracy and work, in Japan the relevant discourse had made a clear break with past rhetoric, deriving its power from the ‘shock effect’ of low fertility and related utilitarian arguments. Regarding women’s political influence, it was suggested that female activism both outside and inside the formal political structures played a decisive role in the formulation of more

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<sup>46</sup> It should be recalled here that the present study did not compare Japan with the Nordic countries under the assumption that Japan should, or that it for some reason would, eventually adopt comprehensive family policies and converge with the ‘Nordic model’. Rather, Nordic policy was chosen as a comparative reference point for the examination of new family policy in Japan, firstly due to the apparently expansionary nature of the recent reforms, and secondly due to the growing interest in Nordic family policy in Japan as documented in the introductory chapter.

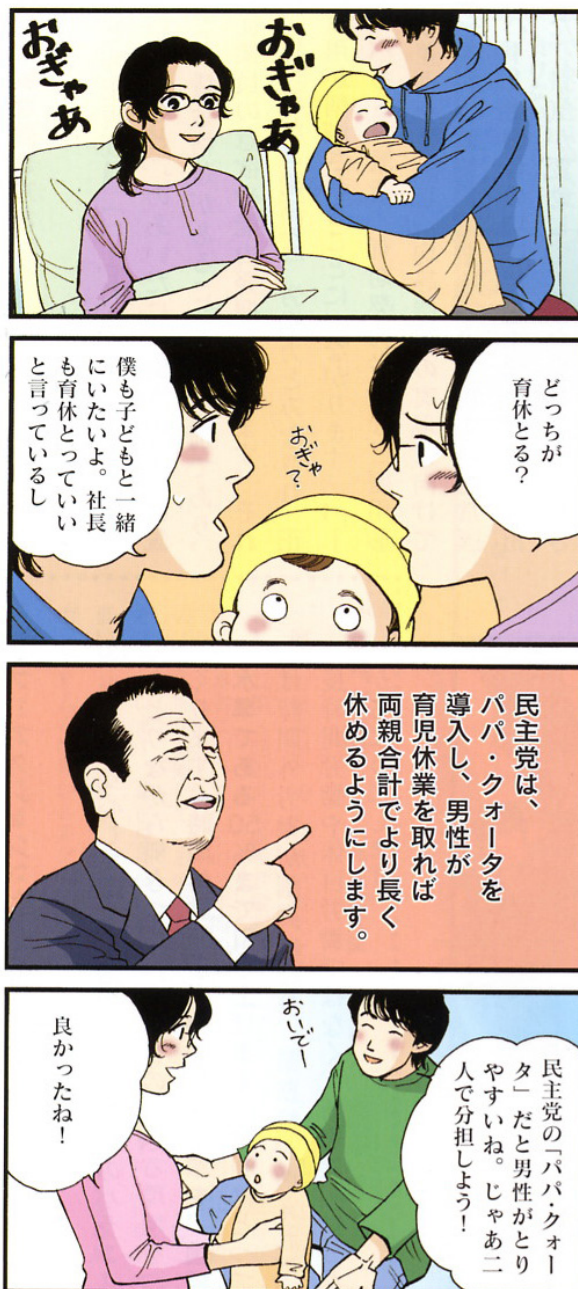
comprehensive family policy in the Nordic countries, whereas the lack heretofore of strong female representation in Japan was one likely reason constraining the development of such policy there. Finally, we contended that demographic ageing and its associated financial burdens pose a serious obstacle to establishing generous new family policy schemes.

Another lesson highlighted by this study is the central importance of the obvious yet often neglected dimension of *time* in comparative social policy research. In all fairness, when contrasting Japanese and Nordic family policy development, we must at all times bear in mind that the Nordic programmes have had two to three decades longer to evolve than their Japanese counterparts. Once we consider this, the pace and extent of the Japanese reforms do not appear unimpressive at all.

*9683 words (excluding tables)*

**Appendix A. A papa quota manga strip from a recent policy proposal pamphlet by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ, 2006).** The party leader that appears in the third frame promises to the young parents – who are concerned over how to share child-minding duties – that his party will introduce a ‘papa quota’ system to Japan that will lengthen the total parental leave period and allow fathers to take leave more easily..

パパにも育休を  
～パパ・クォータ～



### Appendix B. Family benefits per number of children under the age of 15 in Japan, 1980-2003.

Year	Family benefits / total social expenditure (1)	Total family benefits (hundred million yen) (2)	The number of children under 15 (3)	Children under 15 per total pop. (4)	Family benefits / child (yen) (2) / (3)
1980	4.5 %	11,197	27,507,078	23.5 %	<b>40,700</b>
1990	3.4 %	15,986	22,486,239	18.2 %	<b>71,100</b>
1995	3.3 %	21,369	20,013,730	15.9 %	<b>106,800</b>
2000	3.5 %	27,419	18,472,499	14.6 %	<b>148,500</b>
2001	3.7 %	30,133	18,283,445	14.4 %	<b>164,800</b>
2002	3.8 %	31,513	18,101,750	14.2 %	<b>174,100</b>
2003	3.8 %	31,626	17,904,805	14.0 %	<b>176,600</b>

(1)(2) IPSS, 2006: 16. (Social Security Expenditure for child and family, 1975-2003)

(3)(4) Cabinet Office, 2005: 179.

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