

Less work, more child support vital: White paper [JP] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Reduced work for husbands and additional child-rearing support by nursery schools and communities are essential to realize a society in which people can enjoy diverse lifestyles, according to an annual government white paper on lifestyles released Tuesday.

To realize such a society, the paper says "structural reform in lifestyles" is necessary, including reducing husbands' working hours so they can take part in child-rearing at home, as well as strategies such as eliminating nursery school waiting lists.

Heizo Takenaka, economic and fiscal policy minister, said in a statement released with the paper, "Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's structural reform plan, which proposes a labor system that allows diverse ways of working and strategies such as no waiting lists at nursery schools, is part of measures" to realize such a society.

While Japanese are making diverse lifestyle choices as their values change, conventional social systems related to the family are becoming increasingly incompatible with such changes, the paper says.

The ratio of full-time housewives married to salaried workers as a percentage of all of married women fell from 37.1% in 1980 to 26.5% in 2000, according to the paper prepared by the Cabinet Office.

More and more women are working full-time as careers become more popular. They also work to cover household budgets amid changes in Japan's lifetime employment system.

The choices of work, however, are limited as "many of them work part-time while shouldering major housework including child-rearing," the paper states.

The government report said the marriage rate is declining because Japanese, especially younger ones, tend to see marriage and having children as not essential to their lives.

"Young men tend to think marriage will limit their freedom, and women see housework and child-rearing as burdens," the paper says. It warns the trend will exacerbate the decline in Japan's birthrate.

As an example of a countermeasure, the white paper includes a simulation that predicts if husbands' work hours are reduced while nursery school capacity is doubled, the number of wives working full-time will nearly double.

If nursery school capacity for children under 6 increases from the current 23% to 50%, the likelihood of wives working full-time will jump from 11.2% to 19% if husbands work 10 hours a day.

If husbands only work eight hours, the chances of wives working full-time will be up from the current 16.1% to 26.2%, the paper said.

Child-care volunteer work by individuals and nonprofit groups is also becoming critical as child-rearing at home and in communities is declining due to the increasing number of nuclear families, according to the report.

The report urges companies to come up with effective support systems to enable male employees to help in child-rearing. In a 2000 survey, 80.1% said society or businesses do not provide enough help for male workers in taking child-care leave although they have the legal right to do so.

The report also says mobile phones and the Internet can be used to expand work choices in accordance with family situations and can be tools to reinforce family ties.

According to the report, 70.4% of men who live apart from their families due to work and 54.9% of independent or married children said such tools increase communication between family members.

The report also mentions nursery schools that provide parents footage of nursery rooms and their children through the Internet.

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