

of Japanese fathers in providing childcare. The ministry's campaign became widespread thanks to its eye-catching visuals, which featured a well-known pop singer's husband (at the time) and her baby boy alongside its controversial copy: "A man who does not take care of his children shall not be called a father" (*Ikuji o shinai otoko o chichi towa yobanai*). In response to these government efforts implemented primarily to tackle ever-declining birth rates, IKUJIREN decided to create its own version of the campaign by creating a similar-looking poster but with its own portraits of fathers nursing or playing with their children. Its poster also included provocative phrases such as "Let us look after our children as we like!" and "Companies who do not send their parenting employees home shall not be called corporate citizens."<sup>15</sup>

Such initiatives were followed by slightly different measures, and new groups of fathers formed different types of organizations with their own respective agendas. Goldstein-Gidoni's main informants in this study sought their place outside the corporate world and "crafted" their new identities as househusbands who are proactively and fully committed to providing childcare and performing household chores. These men situate themselves in antithesis to three categories of what are referred to by Goldstein-Gidoni as "symbolic others": (1) *ikumen*, a trendy but superficial label for fathers who ostensibly enjoy childcare but lack full commitment; (2) salarymen, who continue to sustain the hardworking masculine regime; and (3) full-time housewives, who are paired with salarymen and exemplify the practice of parenting as the mother's domain. This strategic positioning makes these househusbands' presence unique and potentially meaningful in the possible reformulation of existing gendered roles. I wonder, however, Who are their allies?

In the case of the abovementioned fathers who took childcare leave, they constantly negotiated with their bosses, colleagues, and most importantly, their partners to achieve their goals of becoming full-fledged fathers. Their choice to continue to work in corporate organizations as salarymen while securing more time for their private lives required such negotiations and sometimes led to unwanted conflicts or unexpected support. In this respect, what seems to be missing from this piece is an ethnographic account of the everyday politics surrounding househusbands and people in their immediate environments. For example, do these fathers who take their parental roles seriously expect a matching contribution from their wives? Who sets the standard for the quality of housework? Do full-time working wives feel displaced if their children are closer to their fathers, who may spend more time with them than their mothers? When househusbands combine paid jobs with their domestic tasks, do they not face the frustrations and dilemmas that are so commonly experienced by many working mothers?

Goldstein-Gidoni did touch on some negative responses that the wives of her informants received as a result of not

being the primary caretakers for their children. This is precisely why the government's 1999 campaign drew so many mixed reactions. When mothers fail to live up to expectations, they are reproached from all sections of society, but worst of all, the most critical eyes are cast by themselves, causing them to feel guilty. More than 20 years later, this situation has not changed much. What has changed, however, is the work styles of conjugal couples. The percentage of double-income households increased from 47.7% in 1999 to 66.2% in 2019,<sup>16</sup> which means that men with (either full-time or part-time) working wives are no longer a minority and the "postwar Japanese family system" is a thing of the past in statistical terms. Nevertheless, Japanese corporate culture still cherishes its normative understanding of gender divisions by setting hardworking men, free from any domestic duties despite their marital or parental statuses, as its core workforce. The persistence of such a culture torments not only working wives and mothers, who are constantly tested by two sets of loyalties toward their work and family, but also male and young unmarried female employees, who must prove themselves by sacrificing their private lives to demonstrate their competence and be taken seriously at work. Its extreme consequence is the continuing case of death by overwork (*karoshi*).

In this light, the househusbands' endeavors may be aligned with vital efforts to give due respect to unpaid domestic tasks in general and childcare responsibilities in particular. "Undoing gender" may be achieved only when people have a true choice about whether they work, provide care, or do both, depending on their wishes and aspirations.

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#### The Househusband as an Agent of Pronatalism

Japan has one of the world's fastest-aging and fastest-shrinking populations. Today, around 27% of the population of nearly 126 million is more than 65 years of age (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2021; World Population Review 2021). Similar demographic profiles are shared by Italy, Portugal, and Germany. However, whereas these countries allow same-sex marriages or civil unions, only in Japan does heteronormative marriage remain the only sanctioned context for childbirth, effectively precluding single-by-choice parents and lesbian and gay couples from having children.

Heteronormative marriage is also the cornerstone of the roughly 53.3 million (private) households (*ie*). Of those, 56% are nuclear family households (as opposed to one-person households), and 40.7% of nuclear families consist of members 65 years

15. <https://www.eqg.org/~sakiko/BiraOmoteBW.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2022).

16. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/wp/hakusyo/kousei/19/backdata/01-01-03-14.html> (accessed January 6, 2022).

old and older. Significantly, the average number of household members is presently 2.33, indicating that some married couples are choosing not to have children, prompting demographers to recalculate their projections and politicians to worry about a demographic catastrophe within several decades (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2021).

Fewer women and men are keen on marriage, and the number of married couples declined to 4.3 per 1,000 people in 2020. The mean age of the first marriage was 31.1 for grooms and 29.4 for brides that year (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2021). Women are reluctant to lose their careers and financial independence, as marriage would entail their dependence on and subordination to husbands. The gap between the earnings of Japanese men and women is the biggest among the advanced capitalist economies. Women in Japan earn half the pay of men—and do the bulk of childcare and housework (World Economic Forum 2019:11, 22, 26, 31, 201–202).

In early 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced a futuristic proposal to provide, by 2025, robot maids to relieve women of household chores and child-raising responsibilities, with the rationale that they would thus be more willing to get married and to bear more children (Robertson 2018:33–61, 73–79). Abe's promotion of robot maids, which never gained traction, coincided with an advertising company's coinage of *ikumen* in 2006 as, essentially, a new facet of the dominant *sarariman*, or white-collar model of masculinity. The term indexed fathers who devoted a bigger portion of their time to playing with their children and assisting in childcare as “fun.” Housework and an equal share of childcare were not part of the *ikumen* agenda.

The English slogan on the 2017 splash page of the *ikumen* website Fathering Japan, a nonprofit organization founded in 2007, is telling: “It's damn right fun being a Dad. We're not here to increase the number of ‘good’ Dads. . . . We're here to increase the number of ‘smiling’ Dads!” (<https://fathering.jp/>). Fathering Japan aims to encourage men to have fun with their children—in effect, to turn biological fathers into social fathers. Moreover, “smiling dads” are the foundation of a (mentally) healthier work environment for the proverbial “corporate samurai”—the salaryman.

Even before Fathering Japan was founded, the link between the salaryman and childcare was applauded in popular culture. One example is Salaryman Kintarō, a manga series from 1992 to 2002 with later incarnations as a film, TV show, and anime series. The protagonist is a former biker-gang leader and widower who promised his late wife, who died in childbirth, that he would become a salaryman and look after their son. Salaryman Kintarō goes about his daily routines while carrying his infant son on his back. For him, childcare is both a promise and duty by default since a wife-mother is absent. *Ikumen*, however, choose to become more engaged with childcare as an addendum or augmentation of their salaryman (and masculine) identity. As Goldstein-Gidoni and others she cites note, the hegemonic corporate masculinity of the salaryman may have begun to fray, but it is far from unraveling.

As I see it, both Fathering Japan and the government's inauguration of the *Ikumen* Project in 2010 reinforce and uphold the binary division of labor in the heteronormative nuclear family: husbands and fathers work outside the home for wages, and wives and mothers labor inside the home for an allowance. Even before the *Ikumen* Project, there were government efforts to conjoin the salaryman with fathering. Paternity leave was introduced by the Diet in 1992 under the rubric of “parental and childcare leave” and was revised several times, most recently in June 2021 (effective October 2022), to allow fathers to take a total of four weeks off within eight weeks of a child's birth, with the option of dividing the leave into two periods. The plan guarantees up to 80% of their salary. Because only 7.5% of men working in the private sector took paternity leave in 2019 (compared with 83% of working women—nearly 60% of women leave the workforce to raise children), the revised law obliges companies to inform their male employees of this new leave policy (Brinton and Mun 2015; *Japan Times* 2021).

*Ikumen* are not househusbands. The househusbands (*shufu*) interviewed by Goldstein-Gidoni have severed the *ikumen*-salaryman link and, shedding their despised navy blue suits (“uniforms”), have even dramatically altered their appearance. In the words of one *shufu* (and former *ikumen*) who wrote a lifestyle blog, a househusband is not simply the mirror image of a professional housewife (*sengyō shufu*) but rather “a male who does *more* housework and childcare than his wife” (*tsumayorimo kaji, ikuji o suru dansei*).<sup>17</sup> He and his wife are “partners” (*pātonā*). She greatly enjoys her salaried job—he did not—and as partners, together they have agreed on a “life-work balance” (*raifu wāku baransu*; Wise Lifestyle 2017).<sup>18</sup>

However unconventional, househusbandry does not jeopardize the heteronormative household. It remains intact, as does the dominant division of sociocultural space as private and household versus public and workplace. That some married couples have achieved equitable partnership through the reconfiguration of traditional sex and gender roles demonstrates that househusbandry actually strengthens the integrity of the household as a microcosm of Japanese society. A happily married couple in a life-work-balanced household is more likely to stay married and to have children. As Goldstein-Gidoni also concludes, truly radical and transformative changes are taking root in the Japanese family system. But how long will it take before pundits and politicians recognize househusbandry as a fundamentally pronatalist phenomenon?<sup>19</sup>

17. Goldstein-Gidoni notes that the association *Shufu no Tomo* uses “proactive” (*shutaiteki*) instead of “more than.”

18. This blog post, accessed at <https://wise-lifestyle.info/househusband-2/254/>, is no longer available online. I have a copy of the post that can be shared as needed.

19. It follows that same-sex marriages could also strengthen the household unit and fulfill the government's pronatalist agenda. The number of cities and prefectures issuing same-sex partnership certificates is growing, and it is only a matter of time before same-sex marriage is approved by the national Diet.