

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'Working fathers' in Japan: Leading a change in gender relations?

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Does the emergent phenomenon of 'working fathers' herald a process of change in gender relations in Japan? Against the background of the current discourse in Japan about new modes of fathers' participation in the family, the article focuses on the small group of *working fathers* – men who explicitly organize their working lives around family responsibilities – to examine the potentiality of change. This supposed change in the roles of men (and women), at home and in the workplace, is considered in terms of latency, as a 'slow-dripping' process. The qualitative research focuses on *Fathering Japan*, Japan's leading fathering movement, its ideology, its members and their families. The article offers a critical perspective, juxtaposing gender ideology with practice. Exploring the real-life experiences of *working fathers* caught between family and work, especially against Japan's gendered corporate culture, the article also addresses the persistence of gender inequality in Japan.

KEYWORDS

'working fathers', gender relations, change, family and work, Japan, work culture

Up until recently the combination between work and childcare was the problem of working mothers, but now it is also becoming the problem of fathers who wish to do their best both at work and in childcare. (Fathering Japan, 2014, p. 21)

1 | INTRODUCTION

The modern meaning and practice of parenting is undoubtedly gendered (Halford, 2006, p. 383) or 'gender coded' (Crompton, 2002, p. 549). Whereas feminized motherhood has been separated from the world of 'work', employment has become generally regarded as 'an integral part of what fathers do, *as fathers*' (Garey, 1999, p. 7). Moreover, the cultural belief that being a good father inherently implies being an effective provider seems to have persisted (Halford, 2006; Townsend, 2002). The Japanese case, with its economic arrangement between the family and an economy that sustains a 'family wage' (Gottfried & O'Reilly, 2002; Kimoto, 1997, 2000), is a prominent example of the strong 'male breadwinner reproductive bargain' (Gottfried, 2013). The total identification of Japanese men with their work has earned them the cultural image of the 'corporate warrior' (Dasgupta, 2003).

Even so, against this underlying conceptualization of gender roles, we should not ignore a rapidly expanding body of literature on changing masculinity and fatherhood, which has been described – cautiously – as one indicator of (slow) change in gender relations and the family (Sullivan, 2006, p. 114). In Western Europe and North America, there has certainly been an increased focus and discussion on 'new fatherhood', in both public discourse and research (Børve & Bungum, 2015; Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013; Gregory & Milner, 2011; Ranson, 2001). However, this cultural image of the new involved father has not displaced the breadwinning responsibility incumbent upon men. Daly and Palkovitz (2004) suggest that the recent explosion of research on fatherhood has overlooked those men who, just like mothers, seek to reconcile the demands of paid work with domestic responsibilities. More specifically, it has been argued that a preoccupation with the work–family conflicts experienced by women, as they moved into the paid labour force, blinded employers and scholars alike to the emerging, similar, conflicts experienced by men (Børve & Bungum, 2015; Burnett et al., 2013; Ranson, 2012). Thus, while the term 'working mother' has come to epitomize the challenge and conflict as experienced by mothers who try to 'weave work and motherhood' (Garey, 1999), missing at the level both of practice and discourse was consideration of 'working fathers', quite possibly experiencing similar conflict (Ranson, 2012).

Recently, the participation of fathers in parenting and caring has become a topical issue in Japan, in both public and governmental discourse (Taga, 2016). More specifically, Japan was described as at the 'peak of men's childcare boom' (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013, p. 38). Against this background, I will tentatively suggest that the emergent group of *working fathers*, the focus of this article, may be regarded as forerunners of a larger ongoing process of change in gender relations in Japan. The perspective of change adopted in this article is of the 'slow-dripping kind', incremental rather than revolutionary or apocalyptic (Ranson, 2001, 2012; Sullivan, 2004, 2006). Focusing mainly on the ideology, activities and members of Japan's leading New Father's movement, *Fathering Japan*, the article examines whether, and to what level, the changing discourse and practice is *undoing* conventional understandings of masculinity and fathering (Deutsch, 2007). However, fatherhood, or more specifically, the making of men into fathers, is bound up with institutions (Hobson & Morgan, 2002, p. 9). The article will also explore the real-life experiences of *working fathers* caught between family and work, and will critically examine obstacles in the path to change.

2 | 'WORKING FATHERS' AND CHANGES IN GENDER RELATIONS

The citation that opens this article, taken from a textbook published by the non-profit organization *Fathering Japan*, calls for the redefinition of terms describing the interface between home and work, to include 'fathers who wish to do their best both at work and in childcare'. Conceptualizing the term 'working mother', Garey (1999) noted that 'we don't have an equivalent term "working father" even though most men are employed and most men have or will have children' (p. 10). This lack of equivalent terms for both mothers and fathers can be understood by the heavy conceptual meaning of the term 'working mother', which is not merely descriptive, but in fact 'juxtaposes two words with antithetical cultural images'. Motherhood and paid employment are seen as 'oppositional arenas', whereas paid employment is an integral part of being a father (Garey, 1999, pp. 6–7).

By coining the phrase 'working fathers' in their pioneering book *Working Fathers: New Strategies for Balancing Work and Family*, Levine and Pittinsky (1997) turned the taken-for-granted into something glaringly apparent (Daly & Palkovitz, 2004, p. 211). Their aim was not only to highlight that 'work and family are interdependent for fathers, just like they are for mothers', but also to warn against the absence of 'working fathers' from the discourse on work-family balance (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997, p. 5). The work-life balance (WLB) debate, including work-family policies and programmes, has either focused on women – excluding men seeking to become more involved with childcare and domestic roles (Fleetwood, 2007) – or, even more perturbably, has adopted supposedly gender-neutral terminology, while ignoring the changing expectations of fathers (Ranson, 2012, p. 741).

A gender-neutral approach to the interface between work and family masks, in effect, the gender coding embedded in the differing work and family expectations of mothers and fathers (Connell, 2005; Holter, 2007). In other words, the work organizations that employ parents are as gendered as parenting (Acker, 1990; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). The 'ordinary' or 'universal' worker is male (Acker, 1998), 'zero drag' and without the domestic hindrances – responsibilities to a spouse, children or the household – that may impede full commitment to work (Hochschild, 1997).

Certainly, the 'new father' terminology suggests the growing variety of ways of being a father (Hearn, 2002, p. 255). By focusing here on the 'working father', I join the call for debates on fathers and fatherhood to be more explicitly gendered. Introducing 'working fathers' –

men who do take advantage of the workplace initiatives most commonly used by mothers and who in other ways explicitly organize their working lives around the family responsibilities they are committed, or obliged, to assume (Ranson, 2012, p. 742; emphasis in original)

– into the discussion is crucial for a better understanding of the interrelationship between gender, work and the family. Furthermore, the inclusion of the 'institutional triangle' connecting family, (labour) market and state into the analysis enriches our understanding of the 'gendering of fathers' (Morgan, 2002, p. 274).

As suggested by Ranson (2012, p. 747), working fathers could 'qualify as a sign of change because their emergence can be argued to be a logical extension of the slow but widespread movement towards equality in gender relations'. This perspective of slow change (Sullivan, 2004, 2006) allows us to see change in gender relations, even if it is still at a basic stage (Deutsch, 2007). A central insight of this perspective, considering changes in gender relations over time, is that by over-focusing on the persistence of inequality, we sacrifice the potential for detecting the slow changes actually taking place. One of the important contributions of the concept of *doing gender* (West & Zimmerman, 1987) was underscoring the importance of the interactional level for understanding the persistence of unequal gender relations. By *undoing gender*, Deutsch (2007) certainly did not suggest that we ignore the persistence of this inequality. Her plea was 'that we shift our inquiry about ongoing social interactions to focus on change' (p. 114). Like Deutsch, I do not have the answers, but I do believe in posing new questions. I also hold to maintaining a critical perspective. For example, one should not ignore the reality that the men who respond to changing images of fatherhood often face the same dilemmas as working mothers (Gerson, 2010). Furthermore, these men also face additional obstacles and difficulties as 'men', as will be further explored in the article.

3 | MEN AT WORK, WOMEN AT HOME: GENDER CODING IN JAPAN

'Men should work outside the home for wages and women should protect the household' is the common survey item used to measure attitudinal changes in Japan's normative differentiation of social roles and division of labour between the sexes (North, 2012, p. 17; Takahashi, Kamano, Matsuda, Onode, & Yoshizumi, 2014, p. 98). This division, strongly embedded, is largely related to Japan's rapid post-war economic growth and ensuing period of high social stability (especially between the 1960s and the 1980s). The 'standardization' of the Japanese family during this

period created the 'postwar Japanese family system': a nuclear family consisting of a salaryman husband, a full-time housewife and their children (Goldstein-Gidoni 2019; Ochiai, 1996). The ideological force of this family pattern became so striking that the representation of a heterosexual, suited urban middle-class white-collar worker, totally devoted to his employer, has been described as embodying 'the archetypical citizen' (Mackie, 2002, p. 203) in the modern Japanese political system; concomitantly, being a housewife became virtually synonymous with womanhood (Ochiai, 1996, p. 35).

Following the early 1990s collapse of the economic bubble, Japan has experienced several notable social and economic changes. The well-established lifetime employment system has undergone major shifts, albeit not to the extent of total collapse (Matanle, 2006). This prompted a destandardization of the life course, coupled with growing employment insecurity, especially for the young generation (Brinton, 2011). There has also been a gradual decrease in the number of single-income households — defined in government statistics as households in which the man works outside and the woman is a full-time housewife (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2017) — concurrent with an increase in dual-income households (Miura & Higashi, 2017). Japan has also witnessed a marked decline in fertility rates (Coulmas, 2007), as well as some change in marital patterns (Nemoto, 2008). These economic and other shifts have had some impact on gender ideology, nudging toward a slow increase in egalitarian beliefs among both women and men (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2017) and in fact more among men — pushed by the weak economy to seek another earner in the household (Lee, Tufiş, & Alwin, 2010).

Nevertheless, research also points to enduring gender inequality in Japan.¹ Social institutional values, such as the lasting high 'symbolic value' attached to the role of the housewife, and sanctions against full-time employment for women, have been described as contributing to Japan's position as an outlier vis-à-vis the changes that have characterized other post-industrial countries (Lee et al., 2010). Even against the backdrop of a pronounced economic slowdown, over 60 per cent of women leave the workforce on the birth of their first child (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012), and women continue to depend on income transfers from an individual full-time male worker (Gottfried, 2000, 2013).

As for Japanese men, the post-war years undoubtedly placed the archetypal hardworking male breadwinner — the *salaryman* — as the most socially and culturally desired form (Dasgupta, 2013; Hidaka, 2010; Taga, 2005), the manifestation of ideologically ingrained 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, the economic recession of the mid-1990s and the following 'Lost Decade' were characterized by an increasing plurality of masculinities (Roberson & Suzuki, 2003), and the unravelling of the hegemonic hold of corporate culture and the salaryman masculinity so closely related to it.

Nevertheless, even against the changing economic conditions, 'hegemonic masculinity has been challenged less than one can think' (Hidaka, 2010, p. 2). Certainly, as contemporary research — and the narratives of the men in this study — reveals, alongside these new voices there nevertheless remains the cultural persistence of this ideological hegemonic hold, the idea of the father as the 'pillar of the house' (*daikokubashira*) (Dasgupta, 2013). Moreover, the tenacity of the overtly masculine corporate culture (Nemoto, 2013) has in fact often created new forms of pressure and anxiety among those men who previously represented the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Tanaka, 2015).

4 | JAPAN DISCOVERS 'INVOLVED' FATHERHOOD

The caring father figure emerged in Japan in the late 1990s, in opposition to engrained social acceptance of the 'absence of father from home' model that characterized the post-war period (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; Nakatani, 2006). More recently, in 2006 the advertising company Hakuōdō coined the neologism *Ikumen*, encapsulating this new conceptualization of masculinity, drawing from public interest in the redefinition of the father's role in the family. Fathers actively involved in childcare (*ikuji*) were depicted as 'cool' men, relating to another popular term, *ikemen* (cool guy). The new buzzword rapidly became popular, winning third prize in the 2010 Buzzwords-of-the-Year Contest. The same year, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) initiated the *Ikumen* Project. The

popularity of the term underlines the growing cultural and commercial interest in new fatherhood and the redefinition of the Japanese family (Schimkowsky & Kohlbacher, 2017).

The Japanese government had launched campaigns for fathers' increased participation in childcare as early as the 1990s. A 1999 campaign by MLWH promoted the slogan, 'A man who does not raise his children cannot be called a father.' Whilst this campaign sparked heated public debate, it did bring to the fore the notion of the 'father who raises his children'. The background for this and similar campaigns is actually a broader political agenda, an attempt to address Japan's low-fertility crisis (Boling, 2015, p. 106). In addition to adopting policies supporting women's participation in the labour force, and urging companies to incorporate women into the core workforce (Mun & Brinton, 2017), the government has increasingly invested in promoting the participation of fathers in childcare.

Since the 2003 'Act on Advancement of Measures that Support the Fostering of the Next Generation', followed by similar measures, the Japanese government has repeatedly stated its objectives: '[encouraging] reaffirmation of the importance of the family and "strengthening the father's role" in the household' (Fuyuki, 2009). Furthermore, acknowledging the persistent, contrasting 'reality of [a] severe working environment' (Tanaka, 2015), the government has increasingly incentivized employers to introduce family-friendly policies, including generous paternity childcare leave (Atsumi, 2007; Mun & Brinton, 2017). *Fathering Japan* has been massively involved both on the governmental and corporate level in promoting these recent ideas and policies, as this article will further explore.

5 | STUDY AND METHOD

The article is based on data drawn from two large studies. The main findings, gathered between 2013 and 2018, are part of a qualitative study examining a contemporary phenomenon, the promotion of fathers' active involvement in childcare and household chores. The initial supporting findings were collected mainly between 2012 and 2016, and are part of a study exploring changes in the gender contract in Japan (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2019).

The main findings with regard to 'working fathers' were collected through an extended ethnographic study, focused mainly on *Fathering Japan* (FJ), a non-profit organization (NPO) with several hundred members across Japan. I first met Ando Tetsuya,² the founder of the association, for a long interview in 2013, after researching the association's activities through the Internet and other forms of media. The extent of his public activities, and his determination to effect lasting gender change, convinced me that a research focus on this group's ideology and activities would be a productive point of departure for this qualitative study. After receiving the consent of FJ's board, I embarked on a multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus, 1995). With the cooperation of a local research assistant (for periods when I was not in Japan), we participated in a variety of activities organized by FJ and other related associations, including seminars and workshops for fathers and managers, lectures and so forth. I also followed FJ's activities online, through Internet sites, blogs, Facebook and so forth; and I read and analysed their published literature, which included full-size textbooks published by FJ and its members (as will be explained in detail below).

In-depth interviews were another principal source of data. Interview partners fell into two groups. The first group ($N = 45$), men and women, were interviewed as part of the first study referred to above, about 'working fathers' and the activities of FJ. Interviews were conducted with 27 men (board and general members of FJ, and members of similar organizations) involved in activities related to raising consciousness about the involvement of fathers in childcare; 12 female members, both board and general, of FJ; and a small group, six in total, of spouses of FJ members. The second ($N = 20$) set of interview partners, part of the study referred to above about changes to the gender contract in Japan, were recruited through a snowball sampling method. The interviewees were corporate men who generally described themselves as 'ordinary salarymen'. These men were not actively involved in promoting involved fatherhood; in fact, most of them were not involved fathers. I decided to include them in the study so as to give the study a larger perspective, particularly with regard to work-family relations.

All of my interview partners were from urban or suburban middle-class backgrounds and resided in Tokyo or the Kansai region (Western Japan). The second group of male interview partners (the 'ordinary salarymen') were

generally older in age, and comparatively homogeneous. Most were born between 1962 and 1970, and all were in full employment. While the group of 'involved fathers' was more varied in terms of age, the oldest born in 1962 and the youngest in 1983, a majority of this group belonged to a younger age cohort — born between 1970 and 1983. While all the men from both groups were university graduates, the occupations of the 'involved fathers' group were varied. The group included salaried men, three househusbands, one divorced single father, a part-time worker, NPO staff, freelance journalists and small business owners. Another marked difference between the two groups of men was that while most of the 'ordinary salaried men' were married to full-time housewives, a clear majority of the wives of the 'involved fathers' were in full-time employment. Only one member of this group was married to a full-time housewife; two were married to part-time workers.

The in-depth interviews often took the form of open-ended conversations, lasting between two and three hours. Interviews with both the men and women included questions about the men's involvement in childcare, household chores and workforce participation, and about their activities related to the promotion of childcare for fathers. The interviews also touched on the interviewees' views about contemporaneous changes in Japanese society, including new forms of fatherhood and women's participation in the workforce. The men also spoke about growing up as boys and men, and expressed their views about comparative roles of men and women at home and in society. Interviews were conducted in Japanese, and were subsequently transcribed and translated into English. Some participants were interviewed more than once.

The choice to conduct in-depth interviews in conversation mode, rather than question–answer mode, reflects the social constructionist approach to grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967): the aim was to elicit and interpret the research participant's perspectives and experiences of meaning-making (Charmaz, 2006). In such a constructivist, neither objective nor positivistic perspective, no hypotheses are formed before entering the 'field'. Instead, both the procedure of the research and the analytical products are emergent (Charmaz, 2008). All research materials — including transcribed interviews, field notes gathered at meetings, seminars and lectures, and online texts and printed texts on the group's ideology, such as textbooks by FJ and its members — were analysed drawing on these principles of a constructionist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

6 | MAKING MEN INTO FATHERS: FATHERING JAPAN GIVES BIRTH TO THE JAPANESE FATHER

Fathering Japan was founded in 2006, with the principal aim of populating Japan with 'smiling dads'. Self-described as more than 'just a non-profit organization (NPO)', the association positioned itself as a 'social business company' striving to influence family, society and the 'corporate mind'.³ In my first interview with Ando, in 2013, he focused on the aim of changing men:

Our mission is to increase the number of smiling dads, to change the company and the society. When fathers change, society will change. This is our goal. The society is still determined by men, who are mostly fathers. At home, in the local community and also in the company, men are the main decision makers. So if this point of view about men and fathers changes, society might change ... What we want to change is not only the consciousness of men, but also the system itself.

Throughout a very busy decade of varied activities — including the establishment of the first 'fathering schools' in Japan, convening lectures, seminars and workshops, the creation of online and offline networks, and the publication of texts including three book-length textbooks (*Fathering Japan*, 2013, 2014, 2018) — FJ has established its public position as Japan's leading Fathers' and Fathering association (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013, pp. 96–99; Vassalo, 2018). The growing public discourse in Japan, as epitomized in the 'ikumen' phenomenon discussed earlier, in some ways parallels similar discourse in western countries during the 1990s, a perfect background for the public interest and growing

participation of men in groups related to 'caring fatherhood' (Hobson, 2002; Sullivan, 2006, p. 25). Charismatic leadership, combined with well-established connections with the media, the government and the corporate sector, have also been crucial for FJ's public accomplishment.

FJ's position of *making Japanese men into fathers* is highlighted in their oral and written texts. In their second full-size textbook, the way FJ 'discovered' (*hakken*) the father (*chicioya*) in 'contemporary Japanese society' is compared, no less, to the way in which Philippe Ariès (1962) described 'the birth of the "child"' — drawing from the Japanese title of his well-known book, which explores the cultural birth of the idea of childhood in the modern world. As the text explains, against the background of a society in which fathers were absent from family life due to their total dedication to work, it was FJ that 'gave birth' to the 'father' (Fathering Japan, 2014, p. 164). Furthermore, this newly born 'father' is strongly cautioned against passivity. As the FJ textbook explains, one principal aim of FJ has been to promote and activate change, through changing fathers:

That is why we set up Fathering Japan. So that fathers would grasp the changes and rather than being swayed by them, would become self-reliant protagonists of their own lives ... The birth of Fathering Japan is the 'birth of the father'. (Fathering Japan, 2014, pp. 165–166)

FJ's ideology, as clearly articulated in their public presentations, in the interviews I conducted with members and in their published textbooks, thus clearly includes the goal of producing active fathers, creating men who seek change. Their 2014 textbook pointedly observes that 'new fathers' should not be the only ones not changing against the background of recent 'rapid and dynamic changes' (Fathering Japan, 2014, p. 164). Some FJ members went even further in their statements concerning the issue of societal change. At an assembly organized by FJ, focusing on house-husbands, the main speaker declared, 'I want to break the traditional way of thinking of men at work and women at home. *Totally smash it.*'

6.1 | Changing the 'Operating System (OS)'

The need to 'change the Operating System (or OS for short)' (Ando, 2008, p.43) as a primary step towards becoming fathers recurred across the interviews with FJ members. In one of our lengthy conversations, Ando (born in 1962) compared the old 'OS', which stopped him from naturally becoming a caring father, to the (obsolete) 'Windows 95 or something like that.' However, the most common connotation used in the interviews related to the 'Shōwa [period] way of thinking.' Whereas the Shōwa era lasted from 1926 to 1989, the Shōwa way of thinking refers specifically to the post-war period, mainly from the 1960s up until the 1990s. Thirty-eight-year-old Kazuya, an FJ member related to the 'environment' in which he was brought up as imposing on him and on his siblings the understanding of the 'way one was expected to live in Shōwa [period]'. His parents strongly believed that 'men should go to Tokyo University [to ensure professional success in due course], and women should get married to stay at home'. When Hiroki (38), a father of three and an FJ member, was asked during his interview whether he had a vision for future matrimonial life prior to his marriage, he replied:

I expected it to be the opposite of my 'Shōwa-type' father, I always thought that both the man and woman should keep on working. I considered my father as a bad example. I thought I should never become like him.

The phrase 'Shōwa men', when used by the interviewees, often referred to their own fathers' way of thinking and conduct, characterized by extended absences from home due to their total devotion to work. The phrase was also often used to describe the work ethic of typical mid-managers, as we will see in due course.

The persisting view that 'men = work, women = housework and childcare' is generally considered as a 'curse' or 'conviction' embedded in older generations — informed by their working patterns. FJ's second textbook, *New Fathers' Working Style* (2014) addressed this with a new approach, epitomized by the word *ikuyari*. A portmanteau word

combining the terms for 'childcare' and 'career', *ikuyari* is purposely gender neutral – in line with FJ's goal to underline the coexistence of working fathers and mothers. Drawing from the experiences of FJ members, this second textbook states the organization's goal as creating a new OS and providing role models for fathers caught between work and home; men contending with 'a work style based on the premise of long working hours' (p. 21).

In common with western countries, FJ's agenda, especially in its early years, focused on 'normalizing' the idea that not only 'working mothers' struggled with the conflict between home and work. James A. Levine, who delivered seminars to fathers in the United States in the 1990s, realized that 'more men were feeling more conflict between work and family life than anybody had thought, but they were reluctant to talk about it' (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997, p. 3; emphasis in original). Levine has since become a prominent advocate for normalizing fathers' participation in childcare, promoting the inclusion of fathers in the family–life balance discourse, and creating father-friendly workplaces in the United States (Ranson, 2012, pp. 743–744).

In a 2014 presentation to students, titled: 'The Happiness of Living with a Man Who Shares Childcare and Housework: Recommendation for [Active] Fathering', Ando, presenting FJ's ideology to the audience, explained:

The word ikumen has become less trendy these days. When it becomes something normal the word will not be used anymore ... The word 'working mother' (wākingu mazā) is strange as well. I was never called a 'working father' when I worked and participated in childcare for 16 years. Gender equality will only be established when there are no more 'working mothers' nor 'ikumen'.

7 | BIRTHING THE NEW BOSS: REFORMING THE JAPANESE WORK STYLE

In December 2017, I met with Shun (42), a leading member of FJ, at a nice coffee shop in Tokyo for a long interview in which he shared his experiences of being a father of three children, experiences which included three periods of childcare leave. As a part of his activities with FJ, Shun delivered seminars and conducted workshops for fathers. While discussing his experiences in these workshops, he referenced the association's change of direction in recent years:

When only young dads gather in a seminar, they show such excitement that it actually makes me think that if there were more fathers like that, Japan may change. However, in fact, when I approach these fathers afterwards asking them if something has changed, they say nothing has changed. Because when they go back to their workplace, they have to follow the same old system. They cannot change.

In March 2014, FJ publicly proposed a new catchword, *Ikuboss*. *Ikuboss* refers to bosses who encourage their employees to become *ikumen* or, more generally, are considerate towards the private and family life of their employees. In 2015, the Japanese government, working closely with FJ, launched the *Ikuboss* Award, to recognize corporate managers who facilitated supportive conditions for parenting and caring. This was followed by a growing frequency of 'ikuboss declarations', employers from the private and public sectors declaring their commitment to facilitating a good balance between the commitment to work and the joy of the family and the home.

Based on their interactions with the young men who participated in their activities and their own experiences of Japanese corporations, lead members of FJ reached the understanding that what was required for real change to take place was 'to change the [Japanese] company, the management style or the consciousness of managers'. In an interview in 2016 with a female leading member of FJ's board, she further explained this move, from 'changing men' to 'changing the company'. FJ, she explained, had decided to rise beyond a 'silent revolution by fathers taking childcare leave', and to focus on change within the Japanese workplace in order to more effectively achieve their goal of 'changing Japanese society'.

Unsurprisingly, and in common with the way that the men described their own fathers, interviewees often emphasized the generational differences between them and their managers, referring to corporate managers as 'Shōwa-type men supported by full-time housewives.' Many identified this pattern as the barrier preventing 'the chance for real change to happen', or at least as slowing it down.

Yukihiro, a successful salaryman and a founding member of FJ, has played a major role in the *ikuboss* project since its initiation. In an interview, he explained that the somewhat old-fashioned 'Shōwa' mindset is particularly identified with mid-managers, men of his generation now in their 50s or early 60s:

When they were young, they compliantly followed their superiors (jōshi), stayed as long as possible at the office, overworked even [at the price of] sacrificing their families [and holding to the belief that] wives should stay at home while men should work rather than take care of kids, with many meetings, drinking parties (nomikai) and business trips. They had been working like that and they have successfully become bosses, so now they expect the same thing to happen with their subordinates.

Being sympathetic to men of his generation, Yukihiro explained that it was only 'human nature' to keep on doing what one had experienced as successful. In his frequent and popular lectures and workshops focusing on this sector of managers, he explains to them why there is a need for change and, most importantly, how to make this change.

As Yukihiro hesitantly suggested, 'the understanding that they [managers] have to change is penetrating. The idea that we are not able to continue with the former way of management is spreading.' In fact, 'Work style reform' (*hatarakikata kaikaku*), introduced in August 2016 by Prime Minister Shinzō Abe (he also appointed a cabinet minister with responsibility for the topic), has become another popular catchphrase (Otake, 2017). Obviously, it is impossible to predict the success of these national endeavours in reforming the Japanese way of work. Moreover, it is important to remember that 'formal rights do not necessarily lead to a change in father practices' (Hobson & Morgan, 2002, p. 4). It is also hard to ignore the lingering strength of the Japanese corporation, especially managers' deep-rooted ideas regarding the gender division of labour (Brinton & Mun, 2016; Takahashi et al., 2014). The following sections will focus on the experience of real 'working fathers' in their attempts and struggles to find and establish a new balance between work and family.

8 | BECOMING A 'NEW FATHER': TWO CASES

Unlike more central FJ members, who generally have sought to discard the term or even to render '*ikumen*' into 'extinct language' (*shigo*), Goro, a 46-year-old regular member, still defines himself as *ikumen* – perhaps naively. 'A father who cannot change a diaper is not an *ikumen*', he declared at the beginning of our long, at times heartbreaking, interview. Goro Tagami's account of his working life was one of the most compelling depictions of the constraints imposed on Japanese men by the 'Japanese company' that I have heard:

When I was interviewed for my job, it was like 15 years ago; I was asked if I could work 365 days [a year], 24 hours [a day]. I replied 'understood!' (hai). It was a major company, a high-level company for me to join. On my first business trip, I met my boss at the airport. It was around 7:00 AM. He came back from Sapporo and on the same day, without going home, he was going to Okayama with me. He explained that he took injections in order to work like that. He was like: 'This is our style. You were hired because you said you could work for 365 days [a year], 24 hours [a day] so now you're going to join this hard-working life.'

Goro learnt, through the attritional experience of working for the corporation, that total devotion not only meant working every day until around midnight (six days a week, usually), but also the absence of options for showing any kind of weakness. Typical for a hard-working salaryman, he fell ill as a result of overwork, and was hospitalized several times. But he was firmly reprimanded by his superior, who told Goro that it was unthinkable that he dare place

an extra burden on his co-workers through his absences. Following the 'advice' and the example of his superiors, Goro took injections to get him back on his feet, again and again. But eventually, he was obliged to leave the corporation, acknowledging in our conversation that perhaps he was not 'skilful to the level that they required'.

Even though three years had elapsed since his departure, he still sounded hurt when he shared his insights as to how he was conceived as a company employee:

I recognized that people there [in the company] were not engaging with me as 'Tagami' the person, but rather as a worker whose name was Tagami. So, being an employee came first. I realized that the worker Tagami got married and had kids [but], I was a company-employee, I was not 'me'.

What Goro was so painfully acknowledging went beyond the organizational tendency to regard male employees especially as merely 'worker bees' (Hochschild, 1997). This painful insight points at the heart of the tendency of the 'organization machine' to render a 'ghost-like status' onto other parts of their male workers' lives, especially their family commitments (Burnett et al., 2013).

At the time of the interview, Goro worked part-time in a job secured through an employment agency, earning about a 'quarter of what I earned before'. However, he was 'excited' about the opportunity his new circumstances gave him to witness 'the growth of the kids' and build a relationship with them. Getting to know the ideas of FJ made Goro discover fatherhood. As he recalled, the chance to participate in an event organized by 'Ando-san' occurred by chance, so 'without being so much interested in [the ideas] or attracted', he went with his kid. In fact, if anything, Goro – unemployed at the time – was more interested in the new possibilities that a NPO might present for his future, regarding employment possibilities or 'what shall I do next'. However, after attending some lectures, he eventually joined a fathers-and-kids camp. He described this as 'a big challenge for me. [Before that], I just believed that it was impossible for kids to live without their mother's breast.' Consequently, he became an active member of FJ.

Based on a major European study into the reconciliation of work and family by men, Holter (2007) theorized two models of change, the *new men* and the *new circumstances*. The change in the 'new man' model is mainly ideological, usually linked to 'specific gender-role attitudes and gender equal norms'; the 'new-circumstances' model represents cases in which the change process 'is more practical than ideological' (Holter, 2007, p. 436).

Goro's narrative of change was saturated with a 'no-intention' theme of change. As is typical in such cases, whilst it is often the labour market or the company that creates the changes, the outcome is an experience that could only occur due to the new circumstances (Holter, 2007, p. 438). Goro remembers his year of unemployment with mixed feelings, as he gradually felt 'uncomfortable for not working'. However, he also acknowledges the 'big impact' of that year, as 'being with the kids' made him realize 'for the first time, what was [his] wife talking about'. This unexpected and non-intended experience convinced him to recommend the experience of childcare leave to other men

even if for few months, because they will be able to experience their wives' point of view and really experience the weight of childcare and this may influence their relationship with their families later on.

Unlike the mostly non-intentional example of becoming a working father depicted by Goro's case, Yasuyuki (32) aligns with the 'new-man model'. While Yasuyuki was certainly not the only one of the male research participants who held gender-equal views, his early visions of family life stood out. Growing up in a family typically labelled 'transfer tribe' (*tenkin-zoku*) – a family who moves every few years, following the husband's employer's orders – his vision for the family he would form was largely related to his position as a father:

I had a vision of an ideal family when I would get married, including the image of the kind of father I wanted to become. In that vision, taking childcare leave was included. So while job hunting I compared companies, looking for how many male employees had taken leave. I think there were not so many people who focused on that.

As directly asking about such a matter in job interviews 'was a taboo', Yasuyuki made his own inquiries, finally joining a large-size company with one precedent of granting childcare leave, in the hope that he would become the second man to successfully request childcare leave. However, when the time actually came to ask for childcare leave, his boss's reaction was 'terrible'. Due to his determination, backed by the strong support of his wife and his 'co-workers' part-time housewives, who told me, thinking of their own husbands, that I had to be a pioneer and take the leave also for them', Yasuyuki finally succeeded in being granted leave, although only after a long and complicated struggle.

Despite their struggles, it was not uncommon for involved fathers to quit 'regular' employment. In fact, Yasuyuki left his company a few years after his struggle to be granted brief childcare leave, mainly due to physical and mental fatigue. His distinct activist perspective on gender equality secured him a low-paid employment in an organization dedicated to the promotion of gender equality. However, most recently, Yasuyuki decided to quit paid work — at least temporarily — and let his wife become the 'pillar of the house'. During a second interview in late 2017, Yasuyuki described the 'declaration' he had made on his Facebook page, to explain his decision: it was based on his recognition that his 'partner's self-realization' through work was as equally important as his own, and thus he had decided to support her career 'without hesitation'.

Goro and Yasuyuki, whose cases were presented here in extended detail, seem to represent two 'edge cases' of what could better be described as a continuum of mixed cases incorporating the two models, 'new men' and 'new circumstances'. The extended nature of this study allowed me to observe what has been established in similar studies, namely that 'circumstances alone would not in most cases have been enough' (Ranson, 2012, p. 752), and that the two models tend to be 'not mutually exclusive and probably have shifting relevance in men's long-term change patterns' (Holter, 2007, p. 436).

9 | 'WORKING FATHERS' FACING THE GENDERED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

One focus of research into the connections between fatherhood and paid work has been the study of the implementation and use of organizational family-friendly policies. Research has demonstrated that even in 'father-friendly welfare states', workplace culture and norms are crucial in shaping the way men make use of family-friendly policies (Kvande, 2009). Parental leave is considered the most important area of the expansion of the welfare state in many Nordic states (Brandth & Kvande, 2002). In other countries as well, the use of parental leave by fathers has been used as a good way to assess changes in organizational culture (Murgia & Poggio, 2013). In many cases, the explicit intention of encouraging fathers to use parental leave has been stated as a means 'to strengthen the father-child relationship and contribute to gender equality in both family and working life' (Brandth & Kvande, 2016, p. 276). Nevertheless, research has revealed that even in Nordic states, often presented as an enlightened model for imitation, men are often faced with difficulties in exercising such policies (Bygren & Duvander, 2006).

The Japanese government has developed advanced policies and measures to encourage men to take childcare leave. In fact, Japan provides paid father-specific leave for as long as 12 months; a recent OECD (2017) report noted that the country provided 'by far the most generous paid father-specific entitlement in the OECD'. Nonetheless, recent surveys suggest that despite a rise of almost 2 per cent between 2016 and 2017, the percentage of men still stands at about 5 per cent, as compared to over 82 per cent for women (MHLW, 2018). Childcare leave for men also tends to be much shorter on average, usually lasting only a few days. Research also shows that the main reasons for not taking childcare leave, among those who wished to, were related to workplace pressures (BERD, 2006). Japanese managers consider a workplace culture of long working hours and the total devotion of the ideal worker as comprising the rational, normative choice (Kuroda & Yamamoto, 2014), and prefer to see women continuing to bear primary responsibility for the family while men work full-time (Brinton & Mun, 2016).

Hiroki's case serves as a good example of the more typical mixed nature of the 'new circumstances' and 'new man' models. At 30, Hiroki was the model of a successful Japanese man. A graduate of a leading university, he was working for a prominent large corporation, able to offer him secure and well-paid employment and probably a life-time commitment, even against the background of economic recession. Hiroki's decision to ask for childcare leave when he and his wife were expecting their first child came out as 'simply the best among other options'. As he explained ten years later, his wife's working conditions did not allow her to take a long leave. Thus, he thought that in order that 'both of us can keep on working', he would be the one to take a lengthy childcare leave at that point. After thoroughly checking his company regulations – 'a fairly large company that had a good welfare system' – he approached his superior, only to find out – like Yasuyuki and others – that it was 'not at all' a simple procedure. While his boss acknowledged that he had 'no other option but allowing the leave, since it is stipulated in the regulations', 'he just couldn't understand me at all':

'What are you thinking?' [the boss said]. He asked me what my plan was for the near future. His wife was a full-time housewife, and everything at [the boss's] home was performed by her. He strongly believed that this was the best way and he said, 'there is nothing at all that a man could do at home even if you take the leave, there is no other choice but for your wife to quit her job and stay at home.'

As reported for other countries, mostly considered much more gender-equal than Japan (see note 1), it is too often the case that male employees who seek to become caring fathers and thus seek to adhere to new or 'relational' gender concepts meet 'a more traditional *organizational gender*' in their workplaces (Holter, 2007, p. 440). In other words, the organizational obstacles that Yasuyuki, Hiroki and other research participants had to overcome before they could secure childcare leave – or indeed any other kind of childcare-related reductions in working hours – were not related to organizational measures actually in place, but to organizational culture and norms.

10 | DISCUSSION: SO, ARE WE FACING CHANGE IN GENDER RELATIONS IN JAPAN?

I started out by presenting an open question: Can the emergent phenomenon of 'working fathers' in Japan be considered as heralding a process of change in gender relations in Japan? *Fathering Japan*, presented in this article as a leading actor in the ongoing discourse, suggesting changes in a father's place in the family and in the interface between family and work, has secured high public exposure. Nevertheless, and not discounting their achievement of gaining a much larger – or at least louder – image than their actual numerical size, can a relatively small group 'legitimately be viewed as representatives of a change in gender relations'? (Ranson, 2012, p. 746).

On the one hand, this article located the emergent phenomenon of 'working fathers' in the current public, governmental and corporate discourse in Japan, with regard to the new father's role in the family and the reconciliation of family and work. On the other, the discourse and practices in Japan were theoretically contextualized within the growing body of literature on the complexities of becoming '(working) fathers', as well as in the literature theorizing change in gender relations. Thus, the article provided the space for the discussion of the *small* emerging group of Japanese working fathers, not as outliers or anomalies but perhaps as forerunners of change in gender relations. In other words, the slow and incremental shifts in men's work and family reconciliation described here, like those recently described in Europe and North America, may be at least tentatively interpreted 'in terms of latency', as the 'beginning phase' of 'large changes underway' (Holter, 2007, p. 431; Ranson, 2012).

The article contributes to the critical exploration of the possibility of a *slow change* by stepping out of the domestic sphere. The conceptualization of the idea of change over time, as suggested by Sullivan (2004, 2006) has focused on the neglect in research to the slow, ongoing changes in the domestic sphere. Sullivan (2006) suggested that the nature of these changes, which are not of the 'upheaval kind' (p. 219), has obstructed the possibility of considering

their potential as 'more meaningful indicators of change in gender ideologies and relations' (p. 8). However, as much as changes in the domestic sphere require more attention than they usually receive, this article reemphasizes that it is nonetheless worth taking into account the 'institutional triangle' that connects the family, the (labour) market and the state (Hobson, 2002). The Japanese case, with its strong binding relationship between the family and the corporate sector in strong alliance with the state (Kimoto, 2000), provided a remarkable illustration of how 'fatherhood' is much more than a dyadic relationship between father and child, or even a father and his spouse, bound up and shaped, as it is, by policies and institutions.

The first parts of the findings focused on the ideology and activities of Japan's leading Fathering movement, and gave ethnographic and textual evidence to the growing discourse of *change*. *Fathering Japan* as a movement, its members as well as related associations were found to be ideologically and rhetorically highly committed to leading or supporting processes of change. 'If fathers change, family will change, community will change, corporations will change and ultimately society will change', was the slogan of FJ's 'Fathering schools mission'.⁴ Nonetheless, the latter parts of this article, including the two extended cases of Goro and Yasuyuki, uncovered the real-life obstacles as experienced by those seeking change, as they become caught between home and work. The lingering gendered corporate culture was revealed as one of the main obstacles for change.

Nevertheless, research participants mentioned examples of 'slow-dripping' change – fathers taking their children to day care centres, for example, or taking time off work to attend scheduled infant health check appointments. Indeed, the 'pioneering efforts' of the *ikumens* has brought hope for the spread of new family models, both at home and community and in the workplace (North, 2012, p. 29). Undeniably, young men pushing baby strollers or carrying babies in fashionable slings have become a more familiar scene, especially in the urban centres of Tokyo and other big cities – primarily at weekends. However, more pessimistic working fathers, who lamented the generational difference between them and their 'Shōwa-type' bosses, as well as 'working mothers', suggested that 'the successful experience of Shōwa is too powerful. It is inherited across generations and in society', and that Japan may need 'about three generations to be relieved from this Shōwa curse'.

The interviews and informal conversations with the wives of FJ's members added yet another sceptical perspective with regard to the allegedly ongoing change. Firstly, their perspective revealed a problematic discrepancy between rhetoric and ideology on the one hand and practice, on the other. While some of the wives avoided being too judgemental by saying that they were 'not interested in the activities of FJ', others went as far as to describe their husbands' activism as 'theoretical' – not translating into real change in their childcare participation – 'somewhat dubious' and 'giving the impression of lip service'.

Secondly, many wives, especially 'working mothers', complained that while their husbands were praised, they received criticism. Thirty-two-year-old Emiko, whose husband was the main caretaker of their toddler, clearly elucidated what others related more subtly: 'Now whole society is so nice to fathers doing childcare, but very harsh to mothers who are not doing childcare.' Day care centres, where *ikumens* fathers were complimented for even the slightest involvement while working mothers experienced criticism, were not the only institutional locations for such a discriminatory distinction between working mothers and working fathers. Many mothers related to other kinds of institutional attitudes – for example, the reaction of national health practitioners when fathers accompany their kids to periodic checks-ups. Often, fathers are asked to notify 'the mother' that she must turn up, to answer 'some questions for mothers'. In other words, as was observed for work–family and flexibility debates in other contexts, locating the debate in gender-neutral terms, such as the '*ikukyari*' (childcare + career) as newly coined by FJ, can in practice result in maintaining or encouraging gendered practices within organizations (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005), as well as in society at large.

Posing the question about the plausibility and potential of change, at the centre of the *qualitative* inquiry on which this article is based, was not with the intention of *assessing* the level of such change. The article recognized the 'revolutionary potential of human agency' (Deutsch, 2007, p. 108); but at the same time, I certainly did not seek to discard a critical perspective, nor to ignore the persistence of gender inequality in Japan. The perseverance of the male-breadwinner ideology, as well the economic and social practices that it still entails at work and at home, poses

major obstacles to change. We also should not ignore that, in common with other contexts (Ranson, 2012), the small group of middle-class working fathers discussed here was maybe rather exceptionally varied in their employment practices. Some of the working fathers were in non-standard employment, while others had left ordinary employment, not necessarily through an ideology of change, but out of circumstances of work fatigue and poor health. This may be interpreted as a promising process of a growing diversity of organizational structure in Japan, that may with time lead to changes in the gendered organizational culture. On the other hand, it may be more pessimistically taken to indicate the tentative and modest scale of change. Namely, much effort is still needed before the phrases 'working fathers' and 'working mothers' will be considered 'extinct language', as rhetorically articulated by the founder of FJ.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

I declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Japan dropped to 114th place, among 144 nations, in the World Economic Forum's gender equality rankings 2017 – <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2017>, accessed 24 May 2018.

² I decided to use Ando Tetsuya's (Japanese order of name) real name, as he is a well-known public figure; he consented to this. Elsewhere I use pseudonyms, and I made an effort to anonymize all other research participants to preserve their confidentiality. 'Ando' is also the only last name used, as this is how he was referred to by other research participants.

³ Cited from the association's English page (no longer in use) <http://www.fathering.jp/english/>, accessed 10 January 2015, and from an interview conducted with the founder in November 2013.

⁴ <http://www.fathering.jp/school/mission.html>, accessed 1 June 2018.

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