I. Background to the International Session

There has been a growing awareness about the importance of reconciling work and family life. In welfare states, work-family balance (hereafter referred to as WFB) has become a public policy issue in order to realize a healthy and fulfilling life for citizens. The Japanese government adopted Work-Life Balance Charter in December 2007 and has been championing the active utilization of women in various realms of society. However, framing this as an economic strategy has excluded a more multi-faceted and long-term consideration of the true well-being of each individual living in Japan. Crucial in this consideration is how individuals can, without constraint, choose both work and family life so as to live a balanced life with dignity, as exemplified by the practices in welfare-advanced countries in Europe.

In this session, we have invited experts on work-life balance in different realms from Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, where a greater degree of work-life balance is enjoyed than in Japan. We attempted to explore the direction Japan can take by learning from experiences and practices, as well as problems encountered, in these countries. Particular attention has been paid to the role of fathers, and more broadly, on gender equality in parenting.

Key words: work-family balance, gender equality in parenting, European welfare states

balance (hereafter referred to as WLB). The share of employees working 50 hours or more per week is 21.9% in Japan while the average across OECD countries is about 13% (OECD 2015). The concept of “decent working time” suggested by ILO (Messenger 2006) has not been explicitly put into practice in Japan yet. The 11-hours’ daily rest regulated by the European Working Time Directive is still under discussion. The emergence of WLB related policies, such as leave arrangements and reduction of working hours, has not altered the core of the social structure premised upon the gender logic that defines men as the main breadwinner and women as the primary caregiver. Gendered expectations for men and women have normalized long working hours and work-centered lives for men, and coerced women to choose between work and childcare (Takahashi et al. 2014a).

Advanced European welfare states were far ahead of Japan, starting introducing WLB as a public policy issue from the late 1990s (European Commission 2011). The importance of women’s participation in the labour market followed by the issue of men’s caretaking roles were taken into consideration earlier at the EU level than in Japan. Among the European welfare states, Sweden was the first country to have shifted from a male breadwinner society to a dual-earner/dual-carer society as early as in the 1970s. Other European welfare states have gradually introduced a dual-earner model to various extent. However, considering the issue of fathers’ caretaking roles in the family, there are differences in both policies and practices across these countries.

The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare started “Ikumen Project” to promote men’s participation in caring for their children in 2010, “ikumen” being a newly coined term to refer to men who are actively involved in child-rearing. We have seen an increased attention to fathers’ work and their roles in child-rearing in Japan (Yamato et al. 2008; Suemori 2010; Taga 2011; Ishii-Kuntz 2015; Matsuda et al. 2016). Men’s involvement in child-rearing has become an important issue in order to enhance gender equal treatment at the workplace and men’s and women’s WLB from the perspective of diversity management (Sato and Takeishi 2011). In changing societies, the need of conceptualizing “working fathers” has been addressed (Ranson 2012), and the research interest in WFB from the father’s perspective has been increasing (Crespi and Ruspini 2016).

There is a need for further discussion of incorporating men’s caretaking roles into the issue of WFB. In this line of thought, how can we conceptualize working fathers as well as working mothers? In what ways should we challenge the engendered pattern around work and family life in Japan? How can we construct a conceptual framework to understand both work-to-family issues for fathers as well as family-to-work issues for mothers?

At this international session, we attempt to explore these questions by looking into parenting support policies and practices, and its relation to WFB, in the European welfare states that appear to enjoy a greater degree of WFB. We invited experts on WFB in different areas from Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. These countries support a dual-earner family model, but these dual earner societies emerged from different socio-political contexts (Hobson 2014). Moreover, the extent of the implementation of gender equality in parenting seems to vary (Fahlén 2012). The Swedish welfare state represents the most institutionalized expression of compulsory fatherhood, which includes proactive policies for fathers to take a portion of the parental leave (Bergman and Hobson 2002). The Netherlands is well known for the arrangement of part-time work, which working parents have used as a strategy to balance work and family. However, in reality, in the one-and-half earner family, the father often works full-time and the mother part-time (den Dulk and Spenke-
link 2009; den Dulk et al. 2014, see also Table 1). In Germany, there has been a paradigm shift with family policy reforms of parental leave, parental benefits and childcare. Its goals were four folds: to increase employability, expand childcare, promote gender equality, and increase fertility rate (Leitner 2010; Drobnic and León 2014). Then, how do the experiences and practices with regard to fathers’ role in parenting differ among these countries? Can we find amongst these the best direction to Japan?

II. Japan in Comparative Perspective

Even though the issue of WLB per se has been treated as a gender neutral issue in Japan, there is a large gap between men and women in both policy implementations and practices. The gendered working pattern is strongly embedded at the workplace and within the family comparing with the three countries.

Looking at dual-earner families from an international perspective, the double labour burden on women appears to be stronger in Japan than the European countries since working women in Japan still do the lion’s share of care work in general. As shown in Figure 1, Japanese men spent much less time on household tasks and more time on their paid work, compared to their counterparts in Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. Furthermore, the gap between women and men in this respect is most prominent in Japan.

Takahashi’s earlier analysis using data of “International Opinion Survey on a Low Birthrate Society 2010”, a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan in 2011, of employed female with children aged under 12 and living in nuclear families has also shown that the share of the husband’s work hours devoted to housework and child-rearing (17.5%) is lower in Japan than in the other countries (Sweden, France, the U.S.A. and Korea). Further, the share of the husband’s work hours devoted to paid work (63.9%) is higher than the above countries (Takahashi 2011).

With respect to parental leave, over 30% of men in Japan considered that they would in fact like to take such a leave, but only 2.65% of men actually took it in 2015 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2016).

III. Conceptual and Analytical Framework: Challenges for WFB of Working Parents in Japan

It is not easy to define what work-family balance is. We need to go beyond the idea that WFB has been achieved if couples manage somehow to combine dual earning with caring responsibilities in practical terms. Barbara Hobson, one of our session speakers, has made this point clear in an application of Amartya Sen’s “capabilities approach” in her study of WLB. The capabilities approach makes us consider what people are able to accomplish by utilizing their existing resources (Sen 1985, 1992). This framework “offers theoretical space for capturing the growing divide between the aspirations of working parents for WLB and quality

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<th>Table 1. Working situation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Average annual hours actually worked per worker (2015)¹</td>
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<td>The share of employees working 50 hours or more per week (2015)²</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment rate for mothers with child under three (2008)³</td>
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<td>Patterns of employment in couple households with children aged 3–5 (2013)⁴</td>
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<td>Full-time dual earner</td>
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<td>One-and-a-half earner</td>
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¹OECD Database, ²OECD Better Life Index, ³OECD Family Data Base.
of life and the economic, social, and normative constraints that limit their possibilities for achieving it” (Hobson 2014: 2; See also Hobson 2016 in this volume). We consider that this approach is highly relevant to the Japanese case since the agency and capabilities gap is expressed in terms of a lack of knowledge about policies, which in itself reflects workplace culture as well as the normative societal constraints that inhibit individuals from claiming their rights, especially for men (Takahashi et al. 2014a).

We have conducted two separate empirical studies on work-family-balance of Japanese workers with small children by employing the capabilities framework. In the first study, we collaborated with Hobson’s project in EU and explored the factors which affect father’s childrearing and WFB in Japan in comparison to Sweden and other EU countries. We used macro data derived from national surveys and micro data collected from face-to-face interviews with 104 employees (51 women and 53 men) from dual-earning nuclear families with preschool children. Our analyses revealed that gendered working patterns that were legitimated in the public discourse had caused a large gap between WLB policies and actual practices, as mentioned earlier. It seems that WLB policies in Japan have been effective to a certain extent for women who are able to choose to combine work and family, but they have not gone far enough to promote WFB for men. We found that men felt less entitled to make claim their rights than women, even if the majority of men shared the idea of the importance of fathering roles and wished to have more time with their family and children. To utilize WLB policies is perceived as causing problems for others in Japan. There were many men who felt fearful of being left behind on the career ladder. Gendered implementation of WLB policies at work appears to allow women more latitude in making use of these policies than men. In that sense, men are more constrained, reluctant to stand out from the crowd and are less inclined to think of making claims than the women who have decided to continue working after having their first child (Takahashi et al. 2014a).

We began questioning if it would be possible to make a change so that men as well as women can feel more entitled for a better-balanced life; whether Japanese fathers’ preferences would change in any circum-

Figure 1. Time spent on work, unpaid work and leisure by gender (in minutes, 1 day average) (OECD data on time use)
stances; and if so, what factors would affect them so that they can have a sense of entitlement for a better WFB. In order to explore these questions, we turned to those who have experienced living and working in countries where WFB are considered to have been better achieved, namely Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. During 2013 and 2015, we interviewed a total of 66 Japanese male global workers, mainly expatriates working for Japanese enterprises, who either were living in one of the above three countries with their wives and children (Study 1) or had worked there but have come back to Japan (Study 2). (3) We analyzed whether the different social institutional settings favorable for men’s WFB can alter Japanese men’s perception of WFB and strengthen their capability to make claim for a better WFB. The result from Study 1 shows that their perception and attitudes towards WFB have changed to a large extent. Among male workers who already had a child before they moved to Europe (22 cases), most of them (19 cases) expressed that their perception about WFB and their own lives have changed. Many of them have become more engaged fathers even though their wives were mainly housewives when they were living in Europe. Our result shows that Swedish, Dutch and German fathers have a common feature of prioritizing family. Many of our interviewees expressed that they were influenced by their local colleagues and became able to spend more time together with their children especially on weekdays after work.

A 45-year-old senior manager at an electronic manufacturing firm in Stockholm with two daughters (13 and 11) felt that the life in Sweden had changed his perception of work-life balance to a great extent as he did not have any ideal image of work-life balance in Japan prior to living in Sweden. A 37-year-old engineer at an electronic manufacturing firm in Amsterdam expressed that “family comes first” in the Netherlands and his colleagues put family as their top priority. A 39-year-old personal manager at a manufacturing firm in Munich with an 8-year old son said that he had stronger family ties, and better quality of life and time there.

In Japan, I could rarely see my son on weekdays because of long working hours. I was shocked when my son said, “I like you now dad, but I did not like you when we were in Japan.” I have learnt that it is important to spend time with family and begun actively taking vacation. (Takahashi et al. 2014b)

Though many of the interviewees have become more aware of WFB and even tried to make a better balance, they have difficulty practicing it at the workplace after coming back to Japan (Study 2). Social institutional settings, including workplace organizational cultures, social norms and other people’s attitudes and practices in above-mentioned countries had enhanced Japanese fathers’ sense of entitlement for a better WFB. In contrast, the workplace in Japan seems to be operating as “an implementer” rather than “a mediator” of WFB-related policies. It might have operated as a “gate keeper” for WFB of fathers with small children (Takahashi et al. 2014b; Yoshizumi et al. 2016).

IV. Session Outline

Based on the findings from our empirical studies, we turned our thoughts to considering how “gender equality in parenting” could be relevant as a conceptual and analytical framework for a better WFB for both men and women. As already pointed out, there is an urgent need to discuss the well-being of each individual, as well as quality of life and quality of time for workers in Japan. Crucial in this consideration is how individuals can, without constraint, choose both work and family life so as to live a balanced life with dignity, as exemplified by the practices in welfare-advanced countries in Europe.

We have organized this session to seek insights into the direction Japan can take by learning from experien-
ences and practices, as well as problems encountered, in Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. The session outline is as follows:

1. Saori Kamano et al., “Overview of Work-Family Balance of Families in Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden: What We Can See from Cross-national Data and Reports”
3. Laura den Dulk, “Capabilities to Combine Work and Family in the Netherlands”

Discussant: Futoshi Taga, “EU Countries’ Implications for Promoting Father’s Participation in Parenting in Japan”

Chair: Tomoko Matsuda & Saori Kamano
Organizer: Mieko Takahashi

Prior to the speakers’ presentations, one of the members of our research team, Saori Kamano, provided some basic information on the three countries concerning WFB in comparison to Japan and other OECD countries by using the relevant cross-national data. She showed that WFB in each society is apparently connected to gender equality, work policies, attitudes towards gender and work.

The second speaker, Eberhard Schaefer, presented on the changes of fathers’ roles in Germany from the perspective of WLB, gender equality and child well-being. Using the rich empirical materials from his work at the Berlin Fathers’ Centre, he expressed that fathers should be seen and addressed as an autonomous caregiver. Schaefer proposed the approach called “daddy mainstreaming” in which men as fathers can be integrated into gender equality policy.

The third speaker, Laura den Dulk, took the capability approach to examine “one-and-a-half earner model” that exemplifies the practice in the Netherlands. She showed a significant gender discrepancy in who takes parental leave and who works part-time, and pointed out the urgent need in providing public childcare. She argued that flexibility in ways of working do not necessarily lead to WFB, and that it is crucial to reconsider the ideal way of working and developing a career from a life-course perspective.

The fourth speaker, Barbara Hobson, has led a pioneering comparative study of WLB using Sen’s capabilities framework. She presented on the extent to which state policies for WLB engender a sense of entitlement for fathers to claim rights for WLB in the Swedish context. She argued that to understand men’s agency for WLB would require a multi-level framework looking from the state, the firms and the household, as well as looking beyond the state. Though the Swedish experience has shown some lessons for Japan, there is still a facet of the unfinished gender revolution. Hobson showed that Swedish men’s relatively weak sense of entitlement to claim reduced working hours could be seen as a consequence of institutionalized practices.

Futoshi Taga, the discussant of this session, presented the conditions of parenting by fathers in Japan in relation to their WFB and argued for the importance of restructuring “the male breadwinner regime” and learning from policies and their effects in the EU countries. As challenges for research on WFB in Japanese family sociology, he proposed three important paths of research: 1) studying interactions between occupational life and family life more closely and interdisciplinarily, 2) bringing a social-class perspective into the study of capabilities for WFB, and 3) reconsidering the quality of parenting and the quality of life itself of family members.

What we have learnt from this session is that men’s choices and practices in balancing work life and father-
ing roles need to be explored from a broader perspective, integrating the state, the firm and the family. To consider how gender relations and women’s choices and practices play in all this is also another important aspect. In this sense, men’s caring role should be discussed alongside women’s earning role, which has been missing in the Japanese context so far. It is essential to start a new discourse on WFB that takes into account health and sustainability of future generations (Hobson 2016 in this volume). It is likewise important to study parents’ WFB from the perspective of children’s well-being.

Acknowledgement

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[Notes]

(1) We are using the term work-family balance (WFB) instead of work life balance (WLB) in our research. This is because our interest has been in how Japan can become a society where everyone, irrespective of gender, is able to reconcile work and family life, and to have decent working time and to enjoy good quality of life with family.

(2) Collaborating with a research group headed by Barbara Hobson, we designed a questionnaire and a face-to-face interview schedule that allowed us to engage in comparisons with studies conducted in Sweden and Hungary. It is important to note that the sample in this study is not representative of the population since we have selected mothers and fathers from dual-earner households in the Osaka Metropolitan area (Osaka, Hyogo and Kyoto), many of whom were highly educated white-collar workers in their 30s.

(3) (Study 1): Japanese men with children under 13 years old, living and working mainly for Japanese enterprises in the Netherlands (Amsterdam), Germany (Munich) and Sweden (Stockholm and Göteborg). A pre-survey questionnaire was sent beforehand and semi-structured and open-ended interviews with 36 persons were conducted in August and September 2013. (Study 2): Japanese men who had worked for Japanese enterprises as business representatives in the Netherlands, Germany or Sweden, have come back to Japan over a year ago, and have been working for the same firm in Japan. A pre-survey questionnaire was sent beforehand and semi-structured and open-ended interviews with 30 persons were conducted from August 2014 to March 2015.

(4) The paper for the current special issue is written with Mara Verkes.

(5) The presentation title at the International Session was “Implication from the EU Countries to Promote Father’s Participation in Parenting in Japan”.

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