

Continuing Neo-liberal Reconfiguration of "*Yome* (wife) Labor"

Mieko TAKENOBU
(Wako University)

In Japanese society, the cost of social security has been kept low because women have singlehandedly taken on all forms of domestic work, including child rearing and care work. Prior to WW2, women were seen as domestic laborers within the household called "*yome*" (wife). As such, they were considered an important source of labor in contexts such as the farming household, where they worked as unpaid farm laborers. With the defeat, the new Constitution established equality between men and women, and with it "*yome*" labor was thought to disappear. But since the end of WW2, this system of putting the burden of social security on women within the household remains fundamentally unchanged.

Following the second oil shock of 1979, welfare within the family became central to the plans for "The Japanese Welfare Society" put forward by the Liberal-democratic parties' welfare section. Redefined as "Welfare provided lovingly by the family", the system was principally based on the unpaid welfare labor of women within the household. The Long Term Care Insurance Law was put in place in the year 2000 with the aim of moving from the type of care work based on the unpaid labor of "*yome*" within the household, to care work provided by society. But, within the context of continuing restrictions on social security payments, the income level of care workers has been kept low based on the assumption that workers would be dependent on the support of others, such as their husbands. This gave rise to criticism that it was merely a "change from *yome* within the household to *yome* within society."

The Koizumi administration that came to power in 2001 put in place "structural reforms" and proceeded with cuts to social security towards its goal of achieving "small government." The subsequent first and second Abe administrations, continued to restrict spending on social security, while at the same time implementing policies for countering the declining birth rate, by advancing the "role of women in the work force". This is being achieved through the neo-liberalization of child care and care work services, as they are outsourced to private enterprise, such as recruitment agencies, from which workers are responsible for purchasing the services they require. It is within this framework, that "foreign human resources for domestic help support" are increasingly being recruited as the "new *yome* of society," providing low cost child care and home-based care work services affordable for the "average women." The frame work is also going to turn the public provision of social security into a source of profit for the recruitment sector. There are serious concerns regarding the impact this will have on low income earners who cannot afford such services, and the resulting increase in inequality.