

Governmental Support for Families with Children: Japan and Europe

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This paper compares governmental policies supporting families with children. Faced with a fall in fertility and a rise in women's labour force participation, Japan and the EU countries have been developing family policies which are aimed at allowing parents to combine employment and child-rearing with greater ease. However, little attention has been paid to how the patterns of these policies differ between Japan and the EU countries.

In order to compare and contrast the policies of Japan and the EU countries, we first focused on four fields of governmental support for parents: (1) maternity leave; (2) parental leave; (3) childcare services; and (4) monetary benefits. Subsequently, we made a classification of these countries, by carrying out cluster analysis for data on governmental policies.

The investigation into the four fields of governmental support yields the following results. First the period of maternity leave was exceptionally short in Japan, with the same length as that in Germany. This, coupled with poor wage compensation during the leave, suggests that the level of maternity support is lower in Japan, compared with the EU countries. Second, Japanese parents were allowed to take one-year parental leave with a 40 per cent to 80 per cent level of wage compensation, indicating that a level of parental leave in Japan is at least as generous as that found in the EU. Third, Japan showed a low proportion of children looked after in childcare facilities for the 0-2 and 3-5 year age groups. Overall, the levels of childcare provisions are as low in Japan as in Mediterranean countries. Fourth, financial support for families in Japan compares unfavourably with that in the EU. In the majority of EU countries, child benefits are provided to parents until their children reach the age of 18, whereas Japanese parents receive benefits only until their children reach the age of 6. Furthermore, the amount of child benefits given to parents is small in Japan. Fifth, the results of model family analysis revealed that tax reductions and monetary allowances for Japanese parents lessened their financial burdens to a negligible degree.

Added to these findings, the results of our cluster analysis indicate that, according to patterns of governmental policies supporting families with children, Japan and the EU countries may be classified into four groups. The first group (Scandinavian cluster) was comprised of Denmark, Norway and Finland, with strong governmental support for reconciling parental employment and child-rearing. The second group (Southern European cluster) was mainly comprised of Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain. They were characterized as nations with low governmental support for families with children. The UK and Ireland formed the third group (Anglo-Irish cluster) and tended to have a relatively high supply of childcare services for infant children and least generous provisions of parental leave. The fourth group (Franco-German cluster) was made up of Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany. The main feature of these countries' policies was that their governments gave stronger support to child-caring by families than by external care facilities. Japan was included in the second cluster and had a similarity with Greece. As far as our results show, Japanese governmental policies supporting families with children are akin to those seen in Southern European countries.