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BEYOND INVISIBLE MOTHERHOOD: HOW WOMEN MAKE DECISIONS NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN WITHIN THE PREVAILING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILDLESSNESS IN JAPAN

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Abstract

Although motherhood is believed to be an essential role for Japanese women, a growing minority of women are choosing to be childfree. This thesis explores why Japanese women choose not to have children, given the strong pronatalist discourse on motherhood. Childfree women's voices are rarely heard in society and the subject is also absent from Japanese feminism.

A qualitative-interpretive study of existing narratives was undertaken to record the reasons, experiences and meaning of being childfree in Japanese society from women's perspectives. Women in narratives identified the difficulty of combining work and family as the main reason they were childfree.

A semi-structured interview method was also employed to collect and analyze the stories of ten women and one man who have chosen not to have children. Some of the themes which emerged from the interviews were unexpected. One major reason women choose not to have children is that they reject gender inequality. They described that, once a woman has a child, gender/sex role assignment comes into her relationship with her husband/partner: the husband/father becomes a breadwinner and the wife/mother is responsible for domestic work including childrearing. Furthermore, women, reflecting on their own mothers' experiences, felt that mothers are expected to take care of not only children but also in-laws and relatives. The other major reason for women choosing to be childfree is that they value their individual fulfillment above the social role of wife/mother. For example, women stated that they would like to be human beings or they stressed their identity in terms of their careers, and discussed how they were creating their own subjectivity through a profession. The women's stories also indicated that there is insufficient social support for childrearing, despite feminists demanding it. The childfree women in this study resolve the problem by not having children. Thus they seek to keep an equal relationship with their husbands/partners. Furthermore, these women are challenging the stereotype of Japanese femininity to create their own identity beyond motherhood.