

Birthrate born of optimism

By NAOMI MARUO

While visiting Sweden in late August, I was invited to the home of then Deputy Prime Minister Bosse Ringholm in an old, verdant residential area outside Stockholm. Ringholm and his wife were proud of their residence, which they said was more than a century old. It impressed me as a simple but neat residence.

Ringholm is an economic expert who has served as head of the Swedish Labor Market Committee and finance minister. Mrs. Ringholm has long worked for the Swedish Institute. She has taken care of me on several occasions during my visits to Sweden.

At 7 p.m., the appointed time, the deputy prime minister came home driving a car himself. That day, Mrs. Ringholm had come home from work shortly after 5 p.m. and prepared dinner. Of course, the couple has no servants. We had a Swedish-style help-yourself dinner. The deputy prime minister brought tea and dessert to the table. Ringholm talked about fertility rates and other economic issues.

I was impressed by his folksy manners. I presumed that people in Sweden are like that because of small social and gender-based divides.

Ringholm was optimistic about the Swedish economy, predicting that the nation's growth rate in the most recent year would be around 4 percent. In response to my questions, he forecast that Sweden's fertility rate was likely to rise further this year, noting that the rate tends to increase when the economy is robust and employment is high.

The most recent total fertility rate, or the average number of children a woman gives birth to in her lifetime, in Sweden is 1.75 to 1.80. The rate trends relatively high in the United States, North European countries and the Netherlands but lower in Catholic countries of Central and Southern Europe as well as in Japan and South Korea, which are under the strong influence of Confucianism.

Generally speaking, the fertility rate decreases as more women

receive high education and join the workforce. In affluent, market economy countries, however, the fertility rate tends to rise after hitting bottom, forming a U-shaped pattern. There are three main reasons for this phenomenon:

First, with more women joining the workforce in some advanced market economies, systems and public consciousness have changed -- especially in North Europe and the U.S. On the other hand, the fertility rate has gone down in countries that stick to traditional-status relations and gender-based roles and where workplaces, families, society itself -- and people's consciousness of these systems -- are conservative.

Japan and South Korea are on a par with the U.S. and North Europe in information technology. Under the administration of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Japan pushed market reforms but remains conservative in its treatment of women.

Japanese husbands spend only 0.25 hours a day on housework and child care -- much less than the hour or more spent by husbands in the U.S. and North Europe. Only 0.55 percent of Japanese husbands have taken child-care leave, compared with 80 percent in Sweden.

Second, the fertility rate has risen in North Europe and France because their governments spend a larger share of gross domestic product on support of child care. According to a Japanese survey, some 70 percent of the respondents said public aid was crucial in increasing the fertility rate.

While North European countries spend 2.9 to 3.8 percent of GDP to support child care, the corresponding rate is 0.6 percent in Japan and only 0.1 percent in South Korea. In 1994, the Japanese government came up with the "Angel Plan" to support child care, but the plan has produced few tangible results.

Recently Japan has increased budgetary appropriations to support child care. For example, the public child-care allowance, which had been provided to families of children up to third grade, has been expanded to cover those up to sixth grade. Furthermore, public aid for infertility treatment has been increased to 200,000 yen per household.

The Japanese government is pushing cutbacks in social security expenditures. It should be kept in mind, though, that a rise in the fertility rate through increased child care support is likely to help improve the finances for social security, especially pension programs in the long term, and contribute to a fairer distribution of

financial resources between different generations. This is because nations with higher fertility rates tend to have reactivated economies. Therefore, measures to improve child care will pay off in the long run.

Third, countries with a strong economy and high employment are countries where people have reason to feel optimistic about the future. In such countries, the fertility rate tends to go up. The once-slumping North European and U.S. economies have now recovered.

The U.S. is behind North European countries in supporting child care but enjoys robust economic growth and high employment. A survey shows that 62.1 percent of Japanese respondents denied a view of future society as one full of hope, while only 11.3 percent of the Americans felt that way. Americans tend to see a bright future, while the once-prosperous Japanese and Germans now lack economic vigor and are mostly pessimistic about the future.

Recently, however, the Japanese economy has been showing signs of recovery, and the nation's fertility rate is likely to rise a bit this year. It is reported that the number of children that single Japanese women eventually hope to have has increased. It is hoped that the new government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will implement measures to improve the economy, employment and social welfare and try to create a society in which all can have hope.

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