

# Living in Suburban New Town: Examination from Life-stories of ‘transfer tribe’

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## Abstract

From the early 2000s, the New Town has undergone significant change in years since. As the New Towns met with the era of privatization, housing complexes were rebuilt en masse as previous infrastructure was deemed obsolete. Redevelopment driven by private developers is transforming the New Towns as a private residential space. This study examines a major suburban New Town, which have undergone a radical paradigm shift over the last half-century. In addition, it discusses the living of women who moved into the new New Towns as ‘transfer tribe’ from a gender perspective.

## 1. Introduction

In post-war Japan, from the 1960s, metropolitan municipalities such as Tokyo and Osaka established large suburban residential areas intended to serve as “containers” to accommodate the modern Japanese nuclear family (Ueno 2012). Typical residents were nuclear families comprised of men acting as breadwinners and commuting to the city center to work long hours, while housewives devoted themselves to housework and childcare. These suburban New Towns thus functioned as a gendered space to instill prescribed gender roles (Yoshida 2002; Nishikawa 2003).

The development of suburban New Towns as a strategy to absorb population growth and remedy housing shortages in the city center has led to serious problems. Because developers have brought in only a homogeneous demographic of tenants—generally exclusively Japanese and of a certain age cohort—there has been pronounced population aging in suburban neighborhoods within a relatively short period of time. Such changes underscore the need for a paradigm shift in suburban spaces, bolstered as they are by prescribed gender roles and entrenched in the structural separation of production and re-production (Kageyama 2004).

Suburban spaces are undergoing transformation today, 50 years from their initial development. Suburbanization continued well after the 1960s but ultimately came to an end 1990s. Stagnating growth rates and aging populations in suburban areas, for one, now pose serious financial difficulties for municipalities. Japan had long sustained moderate to high population growth, and has thus never experienced such problems. Unanticipated financial strain on municipalities is, in turn, accelerating deterioration and dilapidation of housing estates, roads and schools in the New Towns, viewed as increasingly serious with each passing year. Over the last half century, during Japan’s era of high economic growth, suburban areas swelled with the inflow of rural-urban migrants seeking employment opportunities in the city. Although overcrowding was repeatedly made an issue, never had suburban population decline been a concern (Miyazawa 2006; Kagawa 2011).

Under the guise of downsizing and restructuring, New Towns’ administrative functions are gradually being transitioned from public to private entities. Injections of capital by developers from the private sector are helping to rebuild the once deteriorated housing estates on behalf of the municipality, inviting

younger residents to move in and revitalize the population. On the other hand, Japanese employment practices such as lifetime employment and seniority are now a thing of the past, and there has been an increase in the number of families taking up lifestyles that do not rely on the modern nuclear family model (Kimura 2008).

Based on a case study of major suburban New Town built during Japan's post-war era of economic growth, and based on women who have moved into the new New Towns as 'transfer tribe' (tenkin-zoku)<sup>1</sup>, the next section clarifies how reorganization of the physical environment contributes to change in family models-particularly that tending towards the abandonment of the modern nuclear family.

## 2. Redevelopment of the New Towns

The sample communities used in this study is Senri New Town in Osaka Prefecture (Figure 1). The New Towns was developed by public sector entities belonging to both national and local governments (Osaka Prefecture 1972). Japan experienced a period of remarkably high economic growth in the 1950s. Over this time, the urban population grew as migration from rural areas to urban centers reached dramatic proportions. The growth of job opportunities in major metropolitan centers such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, as well as the advantages of higher incomes there, resulted in a tremendous increase in streams of urban migration.



Figure 1 The western districts of Senri New Town (August 2014)

Senri New Town is located about 15 km north of central Osaka. It consists of an eastern region (the Suita area), where development began in the early 1960s, and a western region (the Toyonaka area), which was the last to undergo development (Figure 2). Senri New Town was similar to other urban planning schemes designed to address pressing housing shortages in the urban center. Plans for the New Town included the development of roadways and railways allowing access to Osaka's city center in about 20 min. Since its establishment in 1958, it has become one of Japan's major suburban New Towns. Developed by a public corporation of Osaka prefecture, it was home to about 150,000 people. The proportion of

the population over 65 years old reached approximately 30.1 % in 2010 (the Population Census 2010).



Figure 2 The Center of Senri New Town (August 2014)

In the 1960s, Senri New Town became a popular residential area among upper-middle class white-collar workers commuting to central Osaka for work. Owing to its extremely close distance from the city center and its convenience, Senri New Town is rising in popularity among young upper and middle class households. Spurred by this, private developers began to progressively recognize the value of its real estate from the 2000s and actively pursue redevelopment (Figure 3). Although New Town populations were once aging<sup>2</sup>, some have undergone rejuvenation in recent years (Kagawa 2011; Tsutsumi 2011).

During 1960s and 1970s, a majority of husbands worked at offices in downtown, while their wives were full-time housewives without as much as even part-time jobs. These housewives in middle or upper-middle class families fit the “men as breadwinners” model. Moreover, most families in New Towns like Tokyo and Osaka are nuclear families with husbands working full-time. How do the families in redeveloped New Towns today actually live?

I would like to examine a key characteristic of women who have moved with their families into the new Senri New Town. To do so, let us first look at women’s employment rates in the western districts, where there has been population growth. As shown in Figure 4, we can see that housewives account for no more than approximately 4 % of Senri New Town’s entire female population (Figure 4). Presently, the percentage of working women, regardless of marital status, is very high. More than 90 % women who have moved with their families into the western districts, known as the new Senri New Town are engaged in office work. Gradually they are transitioning from their previous roles as full-time housewives into those of working women.

Escalating competition on a global scale has resulted in the collapse of employee security in the corporate world; as such, the number of non-regular employees nationwide has soared. Since the onset of economic stagnation in Japan in the 1990s, companies have attempted to adjust employment levels by increasing the number of part-time workers, rather than reducing them, so as to replace full-time regular



Figure 3 Landscape of redevelopment (August 2011)

workers<sup>3</sup>. Thus, even in the new middle class, greater numbers of men find it difficult to work full-time and support their families. And, recently, women who have moved into the new New Towns have demonstrated their capacity for establishing careers within a suburban community. It should be noted here that these trends in women's employment have been bolstered by the downsizing of suburban, corporate restructuring, cutbacks in municipality expenditures and the expansion of private developers into New Town. They have tried to transform the social and economic environment of suburban areas and posed a challenge to both modes of living and the conventional gender roles on which they are based.

In the next section, redevelopment of the New Town and its historical background will be examined based on Qualitative data (life-stories) which was gathered through a snowball sampling of working mothers from Senri New Town in Osaka.

### 3. Torn between work and childcare

Let us consider the background of working women who have recently moved to Senri New Town, Osaka. How does women's labor and its value relate to redevelopment in the New Towns? In interviews, I paid particular attention to family attitudes regarding women's employment. Most notably, I hoped to learn whether husbands were supportive of their wives working full-time or part-time. Additionally, I considered it important to know how women's motivation impacted their local community and homes. I will examine these points in the following paragraphs by illustrating the process by which women find work.

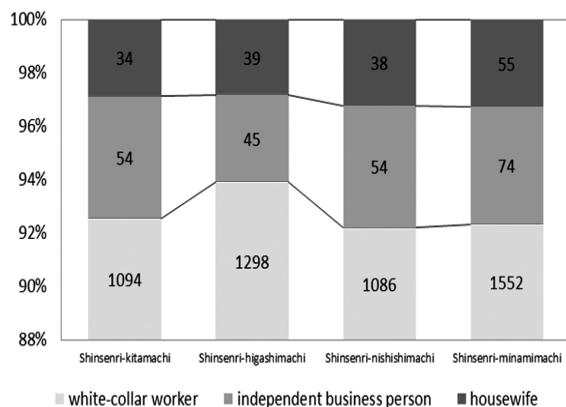


Figure 4 Employment rate for women in the western districts of Senri New Town (Based on the Population Census)

The following qualitative data was gathered through a snowball sampling of working and childrearing women from Senri New Town's western districts. Most interviewees are highly educated junior college or university graduates with an advanced level of professional knowledge. However, many left their jobs mid-career after getting married and moved into the New Town primarily for the sake of their husbands' work. Most interviewees are now working part time, as call center executives, receptionists, or private care providers. Such employment opportunities have been on the rise with the redevelopment of the New Town.

I provide three simple examples of the daily efforts women make to strike a balance between their professional and domestic lives. The first interviewee, Ms. G, age 44, moved to the New Town after her husband was transferred. Prior to her marriage, she worked as a full-time teacher outside of Senri New Town in Osaka for eight years. She has an 11 year old son and had been a full-time housewife concentrating on housework and childcare since marrying. However, she began looking for work shortly after her son entered kindergarten. Since she had experience after university working as a high school instructor, her initial plan was to look for work near home that would allow her to make use of these skills to gain extra income for childrearing. Ultimately, though, she began working at home so as to be available to take care of the children on her own as she did not have access to help from parents or other family.

Her husband, who should have been understanding, expressed indifference to her work. Since he thought his income and his efforts were enough to support the family, he did not understand her reasons for working while remaining responsible for the home. Therefore, even after a hard day's work, Ms. G had to singularly manage the exhausting burden of chores. In these conditions, she recalled how her discovery of a mothers' network through her children's kindergarten provided her with psychological relief.

"When [my child] was still young, it was a huge relief just to be invited over for a cup of tea and a chat. [...] You might think I am a horrible mother, but being alone [with my child] was a real chore."

As he went to work, Ms. G's husband left all the childrearing duties to his wife. Ms. G was herself unable to ask for help or support from parents, relatives, and old friends, because her husband and she had been relocated to a place far from family, much like many of her counterparts. Therefore, she was obligated to spend time with her child alone in the daytime. Within this scenario, she felt conflicted between her child and her work, causing her to feel lonely. Thus, she was relieved to find that a network of parents existed within the local community.

The second interviewee, Ms. A, age 42, moved to New Town for her husband's job. She had been working full-time for a year at a department store in Osaka. She has two sons, 11 and 13 years old. After graduating from university, she had worked at another department store in central Nagoya, but left after marrying to devote herself to housework and childcare. She took the opportunity to work again after her children entered elementary school. She found a part-time job at a fast food shop in Senri New Town. However, it was hard for her to pick her children up in time from after-school care.

Above all else, she wanted to be able to welcome her children home after school. She had given up her job as a department store clerk once before to raise her children. But she still wanted to return to full-time work at a department store and managed to do this in her early 40s. Ms. A expresses great satisfaction with her work because, as she says, of the many people that rely on her and openly show gratitude for her

work. Her family, including her junior high school age children, demonstrate significant understanding and sympathy for her personal and professional choices, thereby instilling her with confidence that she can simultaneously cope with both raising children and work at present. From her account, we can recognize the proactive stance that she has taken in thinking about her life plan, not only for her children but also for herself.

“[Up until now,] you could say that my decisions depended on whether something would be good for my children. But then, after all, they’ ll be leaving the nest one of these days, and when you ask yourself whether there will be anything left for you, I think the best thing is to be doing the work you want to do. [...] I felt sorry for the kids, but I just said ‘I’ m off to work!’ ”

The third interviewee is Ms. E, age 51, who originally lived in Yokohama but later moved to Senri New Town because of her husband’ s job. Her sons are university students, and her daughter is in junior high school. Initially, she sought work close to home because she needed income to pay for her children’ s tuition. However, she was rejected by several employers as they perceived her to be a member of the ‘transfer tribe’, which refers to Japanese office workers, public employees and their families who transfer into new branch offices for work and remain for only a short time. Households in such a situation are typically unable to receive help in childrearing from parents, relatives, or other close friends and family.

“I was part of the ‘transfer tribe’, so no one would give me a job. [...] They’d say, ‘when [your kid] has a fever, don’t you have anyone to look after her?’ Since I didn’ t have any relatives here in Osaka, there were only my friends [to rely on].”

Because she came to Osaka from Yokohama, where family lived, Ms. E has been struggling to find someone to help with her children. She has a network of support through her children’ s school and her friends in Senri New Town, but she was frustrated by the thought of having to leave her sick children with friends. Her husband acknowledged this concern, and tried to persuade her to give up looking for work. This took her by surprise, because she only wanted to work for herself and her children, and did not expect to face a lack of understanding from her husband.

How long will her family stay in New Town? Ms. E does not know since, ultimately, her husband’ s company will decide. But, for now, she is enjoying working as a care-giver in New Town. She was introduced to this job by a local friend and is able to work without feeling as if she is inconveniencing her family. These stories tell us that changing norms and gender roles in the family are opening new ways of life, especially for women in suburban areas. Though women must confront a number of difficulties, their local community networks appear to be backing them up.

Most women in New Towns once devoted themselves to acting as housewives in line with the old model of men as breadwinners. As they had little economic difficulty at the time, such women only looked for work as a means to ‘self-actualization’, as does Ms. A. But recently, circumstances have changed as lifetime employment and seniority systems in Japanese companies have disintegrated. Women and men alike are more commonly engaging in non-regular employment. This means that the male breadwinner model, which the modern suburban nuclear family has depended on, has eclipsed. As seen in the cases of Ms. G and Ms. E, suburban women have little choice but to enter the world of work in response to the

precarious economic condition of their households.

#### 4. Conclusion

Modern-day residents experience uneasiness in the suburban environment if the space they inhabit seems to be little more than 'an industrial product' available in the market. People gravitate towards differentiating themselves from others, not as families, but as individuals, although they are already divided in a variety of ways within planned spaces (Nishikawa 2003). Suburban residents, and especially women, have been transforming their conventional gender roles by revamping the spatial separation of office and home. Unlike the first generation of New Town women who lived as housewives, women of 'transfer tribe' are more likely to work professionally at the same time that they engage in domestic labor and childrearing. They demand opportunity to renegotiate gender roles in the household as well as expand networking opportunities outside the home so as to find solace from "loneliness" (Jalland 1999).

To conclude, Senri New Town in Osaka has been attracting young families in their 30s and 40s because of its convenient transport links and the positive aspects of its living environment, including its public education system. Underlying this, following the withdrawal of public development entities from New Town, is the presence of private developers who have pushed this living environment forward. Even though the redevelopment of estates in Tokyo's Tama New Town has been significantly delayed, a "New Town Redevelopment Project" has been recently implemented to dramatically update aging infrastructure (Sekimura 2014). Thus, private capital has come to play a vital role in the rebirth of dilapidated and aging housing estates.

But, the New Towns continue to face numerous challenges. Privatization has thus far advanced redevelopment in accordance with the logic of capital. Gaps have appeared as a result of unbalanced redevelopment, with blocks of new high-rise apartments built alongside dilapidated untouched estates, and this situation has once again become a concern for both residents and local governments. In addition, there are significant doubts remaining as to how this new generation of women may balance professional work, domestic work and childcare. Women's efforts to not succumb to overwork while supporting their families greatly underpins household well-being and livelihoods in the redeveloped New Towns today. The reality remains that domestic chores and childrearing are seen as being ultimately women's responsibilities. Therefore, along with the harsh burden of dual domestic labor, women also confront the difficulties of resuming wage labor as a form of self-fulfillment and face emotional conflict (Hooks 1997). Then, because their husbands are regularly bound to working long hours, these women are left to bear the burden of housework and childcare in their husbands' absence.

Such circumstances may not be unique to the relatively more fortunate lives of Japan's upper-middle class; however, once we consider how non-regular employment permeates contemporary Japanese society, it becomes clear that the current trajectory is not sustainable for well-being of the New Town family. The development of New Towns in metropolitan suburb was only achieved during Japan's high economic growth period after World War II, under the Japanese employment system and attendant welfare regime. The strategic historical development of New Towns as urban infrastructure projects by national government was aimed at supporting the re-production of workers and, as such, served as a space for the very model of Japanese family that premised economic growth-one founded on the unpaid labor of women. Unless this history is recognized, we risk repeating it in new projects and, once again, spatially locking residents into forced the social and economic functions divided by gender role.

Thus, I believe that New Towns transformed gradually through redevelopment must avoid becoming spaces catering to the modern nuclear family. A major precondition for realizing this is men's participation in housework and childcare, and I believe that facilitating husbands' return to the home to spend time with family will prove to be a significant solution. The re/entry of New Town women into the workforce enables them to alter family gender roles and gain a sense of self-fulfillment. Such fulfillment may not be fully achieved if they remain private, unpaid, and voluntary workers (McDowell 2000; 2014). Women and men should be able to negotiate their own roles in the context of complex power structures and social practice. As Japanese suburban areas continue to transition, the existing order of gender relations within local spaces will continue to be restructured under many varying agendas.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to the cities of Toyonaka and Suita in Osaka prefecture. In addition, I would like to express my deep gratitude to people who shared their insight in questionnaires and interviews. The study was supported by Scientific Research under JSPS(B) 26770286.

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## Notes

- 1 A 'transfer tribe' is a slang expression of a worker who moves to some branches at a company or government agency. It often includes its family members. In general, they move to the central city of the regional block of a company, or prefectural government cities, medium size cities every few years.
- 2 At the same time, however, population aging and decline have progressed rapidly in others such as, notably, Tokyo's Tama New Town. Underlying this circumstance is the fact that Tama New Town lies at a considerable distance of 40 km from the city center and, as private developers doubt the profitability of rebuilding its housing estates, redevelopment has been rather slow. Now in Tama New Town private developers are eagerly awaited as the community's last chance at estate regeneration (Sekimura 2014).
- 3 According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2012), non-regular employment workers comprise 34% of all workers; among them, 19% are men and 46% are women. Women still constitute a majority of non-regular workers in Japan. However, in such cases, a shift in men's roles as 'bread winner' has been taking place (eg Motoki 2010).