

# JAPAN'S DECLINING POPULATION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF JAPANESE WOMEN ON THE "PROBLEM" AND "SOLUTIONS"

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Japan's working age population, already shrinking, is on its way to losing over 40 million people by 2055. According to government demographers, the nation's population between the ages of 15 and 64 is on its way down from a peak of 87 million in the late 1990s to 46 million by 2055.<sup>1</sup>

Japanese women have been implicated for contributing to this "problem." They are having only 1.3 babies instead of the 2.1 needed to replace the current population. And they are the object of many of the policies that are being adopted to address the looming shortage of workers—policies that are designed to draw more women into the workforce and encourage families to have more children. What do these women themselves think of all of this?

What struck me when I began interviewing officials, talking to friends and colleagues, and reading about Japan's response to its declining fertility problem (*shōshika mondai*) as part of my *Race for the Exits* book project was how marginal the opinion of women were in the conversation.<sup>2</sup> The "problem" was defined and diagnosed largely by elite men. Even the decline in fertility, which might have been a statement of protest—a birth strike if you will—instead lacked any coordination or "voice" because it was the product of many individual decisions, without coordination or "voice." It was left to survey researchers to figure out what was driving the trend.

Below I analyze in more detail the roles women have played in defining the "problem" and devising solutions. Women are certainly an important part of the story, whether they are feminists refusing to admit there is a problem in the early 1990s or individuals opting not to have children. But they have mostly been reactive, defensive, and marginal. It remains to be seen if any female leader can give voice to the frustrations that are at the root of Japan's slumping fertility rate and muster the politi-

cal power to push through the kind of far-reaching changes that the society will have to accept if it is to reverse this trend.

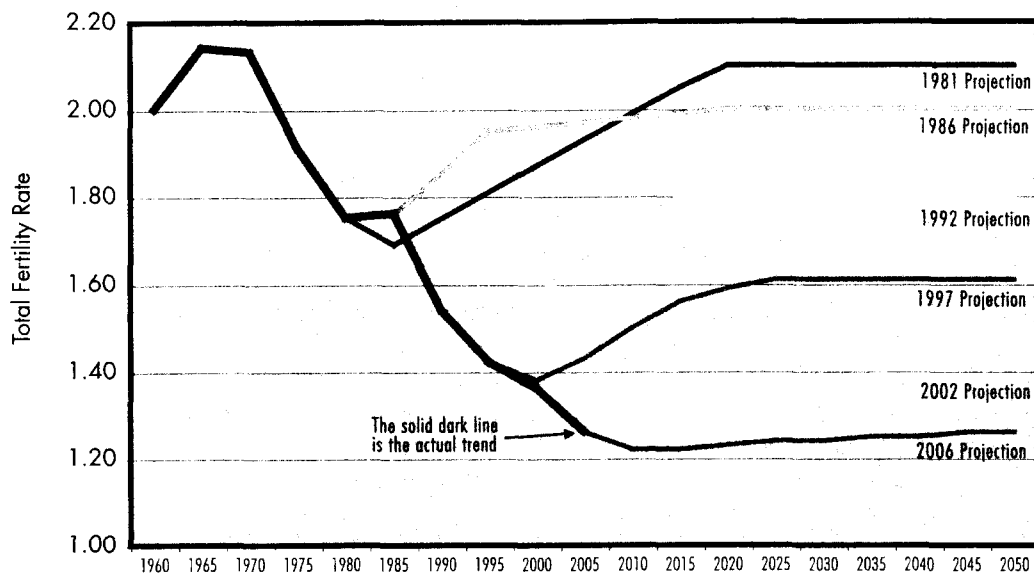
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Japan has been fretting about its "aging population" (*kōreika*) problem since the late 1970s. Though the baby boom generation, born in the years immediately after 1947, was still in their 30s at that time, it was already obvious that society was going to be a lot grayer once this *dankai* (lump) generation retired.<sup>3</sup> The people most worried by this emerging trend were the bureaucrats working for the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) and the Ministry of Finance, together with the journalists and pundits who covered this beat—the very embodiment of the male, elite establishment. The bulge in the population of the elderly, they projected, would put a strain on the finances of pension and health care programs.

At the time, the fertility rate had stabilized near the replacement rate (2.1), so no one was using the term that has since emerged as a companion term: the declining fertility problem (*shōshika mondai*). But once this rate recorded a record low of 1.57 in 1989, the same group of mostly male elites quickly latched onto this development as another reason to worry about the ability of the government to live up to its obligations to the elderly. How would the government cover its pension and health expenditures if the population of tax-paying, working citizens was smaller than expected?

Up to this point, Japanese women were barely involved in the conversation. The decline in fertility rates was a product of many individual decisions to postpone or opt out of motherhood, but few of these women were speaking out about the reasons they were making these choices.

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Source: Adapted from Yashiro Naohiro, updated with the most recent 2006 National Institute of Population and Social Security Research population projection.

It therefore was left to government demographers to figure out what was happening and why. For most of the 1980s, as fertility rates dropped from 2.0 to 1.6, these demographers kept reassuring the public, in the population projections they were obliged to issue every five years, that the dip in fertility rates was temporary. Women who had no children or just one told the surveyors that they still *planned* on having two. The United States had experienced a similar dip in fertility rates in the 1970s as women newly empowered to control their fertility postponed births, but the rate bounced back to 2.0. The demographers projected that the same thing would happen in Japan (see the projections they issued in 1986 and 1992, shown in Figure 1).

Many of Japan's political elite, however, were not reassured by these projections. Some spoke of the threat to Japanese civilization if fertility rates continued to drop. The Japanese might cease to exist as a race. Hashimoto Ryutaro, later to serve as prime minister, speculated that the problem stemmed from the way larger numbers of young women were choosing to attend four-year colleges. Some

conservatives even proposed restricting access to abortion as a way to boost fertility.

In response to these musings, Japanese feminists emerged as the first group of women to speak out about the emerging trend. Their first reaction, not surprisingly given the direction the male politicians were going, was to declare that there was no problem. As the academic feminist Ueno Chizuko noted, there are other ways to compensate for the decline in births besides pressuring women to have more children. The country could admit more immigrants. The fact that women were making more diverse choices, she argued, was actually a sign of *progress*. It wasn't a problem at all.<sup>4</sup>

Worried that the politicians were starting to say things that were eerily reminiscent of the prewar period when Japan's authoritarian government had implored Japanese women to "give birth and multiply" (*umeyo fuyaseyo*), Ashino Yuriko of the Japan Family Planning Federation countered that "population control deserves praise rather than criticism. You won't find today's women having babies for the sake of the country or because someone told them to."<sup>5</sup>

As long as leading female voices such as these insisted that the dip in fertility rates was not a problem, they could not contribute much to the conversation about how to fix it, and so the initial policy deliberations in the early 1990s on how to respond to the trend were dominated by bureaucrats. Facing pressure to do *something*, the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) settled on an initiative in one policy area where they were hearing some voices of concern. Working mothers in rapidly-growing suburban areas of Japan were telling them that public childcare services were not meeting their needs. Waiting lists were long, forcing some women to quit jobs when they were unable to find a space for their child. And short hours, ending at five p.m. in many cases, made it difficult for women working in careers that demanded longer hours.

Other mothers who were not working told MHW bureaucrats that they too needed help. They were trying to raise children all on their own,

without much help from husbands or family (who often lived too far away to help). In response to these voices of concern, the government adopted the Angel Plan of 1994. It devoted some additional funds to creating additional childcare spaces for young children and provided for longer hours. The government also began setting up consultation centers where mothers could drop by for advice, or could leave their children for short periods while they ran a series of errands.

While these steps no doubt eased the burdens facing some mothers, the continuing drop in fertility rates in the period since they were adopted suggest they were not going to do much to con-

vince women who were not yet married to tie the knot and start having children. These were the ones who were quietly delaying marriage and in some cases opting out of the wife and mother path entirely. MHW bureaucrats I interviewed admitted that they had no way to reach these women. The childcare parents were organized, and even the full time mothers had "child-rearing circles" that brought them together. But there were no groups to articulate what was bothering the young women who were driving the declining fertility trend. Unable to divine what was going on from the survey data, the bureaucrats did little to address the root causes of the trend.

#### PROPOSING A SOLUTION

By the mid-1990s, some women—especially those who worked for the Ministry of Health and Welfare—were willing to admit there was a problem. The 1997 population projections had shown that the rate was still falling and looked likely to bottom out at about 1.4 (see Figure 1). If the nation was lucky, the rate would bounce back to 1.6. As they began discussing how to respond to the political pressure they were sure would follow the announcement of these numbers, the group of female officials who gathered to discuss these issues agreed that there were steps they could take to "help women have the number of children they desired." The goal was consistently expressed in this way in order to avoid raising concerns about government meddling in family matters—concerns that were particularly sensitive because of the history of prenatal interventions during the *umeyo fuyaseyo* period during the war.

The big problem, MHW senior official Mukuno Michiko explained in a series of articles she authored and reports she shepherded through the bureaucracy in the late 1990s, stemmed from the way the Japanese labor market imposed steep "opportunity costs" on working women who opted to have children. Since women had little help at home and Japanese employers were so demanding, these women needed generous childcare leave, extensive childcare services, and flexible work schedules if they were to hold onto their jobs through the years when their children were young.

In the absence of this support, women often had to quit work once they gave birth. And in Japan's lifetime employment system, any woman who left a career job under such circumstances had little chance of ever climbing on that ladder again.

The solutions suggested by this logic were obvious. The childcare leave system, which replaced only 25 percent of wages at that point, needed to be made more generous so that it would be a viable financial bridge that would help working women afford to have a child. Childcare services needed to be expanded further. And the government needed to compel employers to offer reduced hours and flextime to new parents.

One by one, in the period after the Population Problems Advisory Council (under the guidance of Mukuno) made these recommendations, these reforms were put in place. Childcare Leave now provides 60 percent of wages up until a child turns one year old. Flextime is available for at least one year. After Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro made eliminating childcare waiting lists a top priority in 2001, the lists became somewhat shorter.

Yet, seven or eight years after these reforms were put in place, Japan's fertility rate is still below 1.4. The 2002 and 2006 projections, based on updated surveys of married and unmarried women about their marriage and fertility plans, have continued to lower the expected future rate, which is now expected to plateau at about 1.3. The most recent projection assumes that 36 percent of the youngest cohort of women will remain childless to the end of their childbearing years (up from 10 percent for the 1950 cohort).

What went wrong? Why, despite the efforts of a relatively progressive group of female bureaucrats and a number of supportive male policy experts to modify the opportunity cost structure facing Japanese mothers, have their efforts borne so little fruit?

Let me begin by rejecting one possible explanation that may have occurred to some readers. The fertility rate has not fallen to the levels seen in recent years merely because women have decided they *want* to have fewer children. In surveys, young unmarried women continue to report that their "ideal life plans" include marriage (upwards of 95 percent) and children (about 90 percent). Married women still aspire in most cases to have two chil-

dren. That the government expects 36 percent of these women to be childless suggests that there is a great deal of frustration between these ideals and the reality women are living.

The reason reforms haven't gone far enough to address these frustrations, in my view, is because these "exit" decisions—the decisions not to marry and have kids—are still being made privately, one at a time, without generating "voice."<sup>6</sup> My point of comparison is with the women's movements of the United States and Sweden in the 1960s. At that time, most women in these societies still married and had children at a young age (the average 29 year-old American woman in 1970 had 1.9 children). When significant numbers of these mothers began being drawn into the workforce by changes in their aspirations and economic necessity, they were driven to demand changes in government policy, their workplace, and their marriages by the very difficulty of their situation. They couldn't opt out of having children since they were already mothers. If they wanted to work, they would have to use "voice" to demand changes in the structures that had previously made it so difficult for mothers to work.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Japanese women today have full control of their fertility and have used it to postpone child-bearing into their late 20s and 30s. The women who are most interested in achieving success through careers are most likely to have postponed

marriage and children in order to pursue those goals. Confronted with a system that makes it difficult for mothers to work, they have "exit" options that were not available to the young mothers in the United States and Sweden in the 1960s. They can settle for the option of working without kids, or kids without work if they decide that is best for them. Few women, only about 15 percent, are persevering in the face of the difficulties presented by the Japanese system and trying to stay in careers after having children. A much larger number, about 60 percent, are opting to leave work at least temporarily, usually settling for part-time work when they return to the workplace when their children are older. Then there is the also-sizable group, about 25 percent and on its way up to 36 percent if the younger cohort follows the path projected for them, that is opting not to have children.

The 15 percent of women who are struggling to continue in careers after having children are receiving some help as a result of the reforms shepherded through the policy process by Mukuno and her compatriots, but absent a noisy movement driven by the frustrations of women with "no way out," the Japanese system is not changing fast enough to make combining careers with motherhood look attractive to the two sizable groups watching from the sidelines. The government can't make husbands do more housework and spend more time at home with the children. Those battles have to be fought by working mothers demanding more help because they simply can't do it all on their own (and might leave the marriage if they don't see change). The government can only do so much to improve the way mothers are treated in the workplace. Progress beyond that point depends on mothers fighting for fair treatment one workplace at a time.

The limits to the ability of government bureaucrats to lead the gender role revolution are illustrated by the fate of one initiative that tried to get fathers more involved in parenting. The "Plus One Plan" announced in 2002 included a proposal calling for the government to encourage employers to offer a "daddy week" of paternal leave immediately after a baby was born. The authors of this proposal hoped that fathers would bond with their newborns during that week and spend more time help-

ing with the baby in succeeding months and years. This policy was indeed adopted, but few firms are doing much to promote the daddy week. Only about 10 percent of fathers are taking it. There is no evidence that the week has done anything to increase fathers' childcare hours.

Last year, the fertility rate ticked upward from 1.28 to 1.32 after a long string of declines. Optimists are hoping that this is the beginning of a trend that will lead Japan out of its declining population problem. Don't count on it.

Absent a women's movement energized by the voices of young women explaining why they find marriage and motherhood so unattractive, this Japanese system is not going to change fast enough for Japan to avoid the population decline that is predicted for it. The only way I can see Japan responding more effectively is if the fertility rate falls even further and a female leader steps up to give voice to the silent revolution that has seen so many women opt out of motherhood.

1. The projection for 2055 is for the medium variant—National Institute of Population and Social Security Research Government Report, "Nihon no Shōrai Suikei Jinkō: Heisei 18-Nen 12-Gatsu Suikei" [Projection of Japan's Future Population: December 2006 Projection] (December 2006): 9.
2. Leonard Schoppa, *Race for the Exits: The Unraveling of Japan's System of Social Protection* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).
3. John Campbell, *How Policies Change: The Japanese Government and the Aging Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
4. Ueno Chizuko, "The Declining Birthrate: Whose Problem?" *Review of Population and Social Policy*, No. 7 (1998): 106 and 115.
5. Quoted in Suzuki Kazue, "Women Rebuff the Call for More Babies," *Japan Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (January-March 1995): 14.
6. My book, *Race for the Exits*, develops this logic of exit and voice, building on the work of Albert Hirschman.
7. Leonard Schoppa, "You're Not Having My Baby: Fertility and Feminism," *Current History*, Vol. 105, No. 689 (March 2006): 112-120.