

SOCIETY'S INFLUENCE ON WOMEN'S CHILDBEARING DECISION IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Rebecca Richko
Florida International University

Introduction

The Focus on Women in Japan's Declining Population

Japan's declining population is the subject of immense fascination domestically and internationally. What is the cause of the consistently low birth rate? The hunt for an answer to this question often only leads to more queries. One of the main inquiries to surface is: What are women doing wrong to cause the low birth rate? It is true that the role of women in society has changed in recent decades but this is hardly evidence of a concerted effort by women to drive the population down. Blaming women, who suffer the same negative consequences of a low birthing society as men, has been standard practice since the news of the low birth rate first became a hot topic about twenty-five years ago.

For this reason, discussion of Japan's low birth rate tends to focus on the role of women, specifically indicating that women should change their behavior to prioritize motherhood rather than a career or other goals.¹ This stance is supported in large part by traditionalists who remain unsympathetic to, or lack concern for, the societal disincentives for women to have children.²

In an ironic twist, this article will also focus on the relationship between women and the low birth rate. However, it seeks to serve as a counterpoint to the popular conservative rhetoric by shedding light on how

¹ Setsu Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 22; and Sharon Sievers, "Women in China, Japan, and Korea," in *Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History*, eds. Barbara Ramusack and Sharon Sievers (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 226.

² Susan Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4; and Justin McCurry, "Japanese Minister Wants 'Birth-giving Machines', aka Women, to Have More Babies," *The Guardian*, January 28, 2007 (accessed October 17, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/29/japan.justinmccurry>).

Japanese culture has shaped itself into a society with a declining population. To blame women or, inversely, identify them as the solution to the problem solely for their reproduction capabilities, ignores the larger issues at hand. While many Japanese women, in fact, do wish to become mothers, they are often met with obstacles that, when stacked together, are too great to overcome.³ This article will look at the varied impediments that women in Japan face when trying to balance their professional and personal lives.

There is a noticeable struggle that women go through in Japan that is not amply discussed in scholarly research or popular commentary. The ideal for women to become mothers is supported by public discourse and is sought after by many women. When faced with the demands of contemporary society, however, a growing number of women find motherhood to be an unfeasible option, even though the desire to have a family remains. This struggle forms from the pressure to live up to the ideal of becoming mothers without having the necessary conditions or tools to do so. While parts of this research focus on the struggle that women go through in their childbearing decision, the focus remains on the factors that influence their choice, rather than the associated psychology of decision-making.

Societal Influences on Women's Childbearing Decision

Japan's low birth rate is the result of a nexus of social and economic influences that are experienced in contemporary society. My analysis of the influences on a woman's decision about childbearing is based on two fundamental distinctions: (1) the ideal female gender model versus alternative gender roles; and (2) internal versus external influences. Idealized gender roles are behaviors learned and internalized by a person as appropriate to their sex and are often determined by prevailing cultural norms.⁴ Due to the idealized gender role and societal expectations for women, marriage and childbirth are almost synonymous in Japanese culture. In contrast, alternative gender roles reflect the adaptations made by Japanese women to overcome challenges in contemporary society.

³ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Department of Population Dynamics Research Japan, *The Fourteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey in 2010: Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles* (Japan Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2010), 18.

⁴ "Gender," *Oxford Dictionaries* (accessed October 22, 2016, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/gender).

Another distinction lies in internal versus external influences. Internal factors deal with the issues that are internalized by women, the emotional struggle of the high exposure to the ideal gender model and the recognized implications of the alternative gender roles. External influences are public and economic policies as well as corporate programs, which try to deal with the population decline. To provide a nuanced analysis of the influences on a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child, the following categories will be discussed: (a) internal, individual factors; (b) internal, public factors; (c) external, economic factors; and (d) external, institutional factors.

Internal, Individual Factors: The Ideal Female Gender Model and Personal Relationships

A popular proverb claims, "If we know who we came from, we may better understand who we are," meaning that the past can teach us about the present. In the same vein, before discussing the current state of women's status, it will be helpful to mention a major historical moment that contributed to the current ideal female gender model.

"Good Wife, Wise Mother"

The Meiji ideal of "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) has had a lasting influence on Japanese society in terms of how women are valued and what roles they are presumed to uphold. The phrase originally came about in the late nineteenth century, when Japan sought to redefine itself as a "modern" nation, as outlined by imperialist Western nations of the time. One of the foci for change was to reform the Japanese family system, and thus the role of women. The improved status of women, especially in education, became associated with the phrase, which was designed to empower women with greater access for their own education and greater authority in the education of children. *Ryōsai kenbo* was quickly adopted and promoted by early feminists.⁵

In contrast to the progressive intentions of *ryōsai kenbo*, the conservative government of the Meiji era changed the meaning of the phrase to create an ideal of women based on their sexual reproductive capabilities, enforcing a gendered and limited role on women. The government's response to the early feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early

⁵ Sievers, "Women in China, Japan, and Korea," 198.

twentieth century was harsh, stripping women of many of their basic rights, and severely punishing advocates of social change by sentencing them to prison or death.⁶

Although women's agency was greatly improved thanks to the postwar constitution, the "good wife, wise mother" mentality continues to affect the ideal gender model of Japanese women today by coaxing women to prioritize their role as caregivers. The intense social pressure on women to marry and have children should facilitate a higher birth rate, but with the birth rate so low, this is clearly not the case. Why is the ideal gender model no longer a strong stimulus for women to have children? Research shows that women who adhered to the idealized gender role by becoming mothers and homemakers, and therefore forfeited a life outside the home, are now discouraging their female relatives from following in their footsteps.⁷

Women as Caregivers

A woman's personal relationships are a powerful factor in her decision about childbearing that is neutralizing the intense societal pressure to conform to the idealized female gender role. There are many private relationships that may affect a woman's decision about childbearing, though perhaps the strongest influences come from her parents and her husband's parents.

Scholars have conducted extensive research on the *ie*, a family system where a couple's male child and his wife reside with his parents, particularly examining the traditional role of the *yome*, or daughter-in-law.⁸ In this system, there is a high expectation on women to provide care for their husband's parents. One expert noted, however, that "the *yome* role is being renegotiated by Japanese women who either refuse to accept the traditional responsibilities of the *yome* or set new conditions for fulfilling this role."⁹ Why is the traditional role of the *yome* losing popularity? Scholars have found that Japan's aging society is partly responsible for this shift in values.

⁶ Mikiso Hane, trans. and ed., *Reflections on the Way to the Gallows: Rebel Women in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3.

⁷ John W. Traphagan, and John Knight, *Demographic Change and the Family in Japan's Aging Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

With an average life expectancy of eighty-three years, women who choose to become a *yome* can expect to fulfill the role into their sixties, when they may need care themselves.¹⁰ Brenda Robb Jenike's field research included interviews with women who sought out government-funded elder care options to supplement services or relieve some of the burden of caring for their elderly in-laws.¹¹ These women, often in their fifties or older, had provided in-home care for their elderly in-laws for several years or decades already. Jenike established that the encumbrance of elder care placed solely on the daughter-in-law was great enough to warrant the need for government aid and served as a deterrent for marriage altogether for some women. Thus, women are making the personal choice not to become a *yome* and are receiving less insistence from their partners and family than in previous generations.

The ideal gender model pushes women to have children while a woman's personal relationships may pull her away from motherhood. This represents one of the ways that women experience a dynamic internal struggle in their decision to have a child in contemporary Japan. Personal relations and the ideal gender model are not the only factors in a woman's struggle, but are two of the most significant factors in this category, and thus were offered as examples of internal, individual factors that affect a woman's decision about childbearing.

Because of the varied nature of experiences from person to person, there are a number of considerations for a woman's choice of whether or not to have a child that fall into the category of internal, individual factors. Indeed, the burden of such a caregiving role may sway a woman's decision to not have a child, but it is not the only reason for declined preference. Instead, the low birth rate is an outcome that occurs when the combination of all categories – internal, individual; internal, public; external, economic; and external, institutional factors – happen in society simultaneously. In other words, the low birth rate is the result of a systemic problem.

¹⁰ World DataBank, "Life Expectancy at Birth by Country" (accessed January 4, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/S.DYN.LE00.IN>).

¹¹ Brenda Robb Jenike, "Parent Care and Shifting Family Obligations in Urban Japan," in John W. Traphagan and John Knight, eds., *Demographic Change and the Family in Japan's Aging Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 194.

Internal, Public Factors: Mass Media

Internal, public factors refer to instances where the standards that are associated with the ideal gender model are displayed and often upheld in public spaces, mass media, and popular culture. This section will explore examples of how private concerns, such as the decision about childbearing, are discussed publicly. One way that this occurs, for example, is through television shows and movies.

The Ideal Female Gender Model in Mass Media

The idealized female gender role is the predominant role portrayed by women in mass culture.¹² Take, for example, this photo in Figure 1 of an advertisement in the appliance department of a major retail store in the Shinjuku neighborhood of Tokyo.



Figure 1. “Happī Wedingu [Happy Wedding]” Advertisement¹³

The mannequin is displayed in a Western-style wedding dress and is placed right next to a washing machine and other household appliances with a sign that reads “*Happī Wedingu* [Happy Wedding].” The choice of gender and dress for the mannequin as well as the message in the advertisement

¹² Midori Suzuki, “Women and Television: Portrayal of Women in Mass Media,” in Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda, eds., *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1995), 76.

¹³ Photo courtesy of the author.

expresses a direct connection to and endorsement of women as homemakers. In other words, public spaces can be used as a way of supporting the idealized gender role for women.

The main group that advocates for the ideal gender model is conservative politicians. Today, many conservatives in Japan view the low birth rate as a crisis and judge women as the driving force for the declining population by not assuming their "proper" roles as "good wives and wise mothers." The public criticism of women for the decline highlights the internal struggle that women go through when they want to have children but are unable to, which is made worse by public condemnation.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration has been known to betray his platform for the advancement of women's interests on numerous occasions. In 2014, Tokyo lawmaker Ayaka Shiomura was addressing the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly about the capital's childrearing policy, when several assemblymen from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party shouted jeers like "Hurry and get married" and "Are you not able to have a baby?"¹⁴ After significant public outcry and demands for the identification of the hecklers, one of the perpetrators confessed and was forced to resign from his position. A couple of months later, another Liberal Democratic Party Assemblyman, Zenji Nojima, commented on the event, stating that the trouble was not in the message of the taunts, but "the problem was that such a remark was made to an individual speaker in a public setting."¹⁵ Nojima's statement is particularly surprising, since he made this comment after being appointed as head of a league that promotes gender equality. Thus, many conservative politicians endorse the ideal gender model, reducing the ability of women to sexual reproduction and remaining uninformed of the outlying causes of the low birth rate.

News media coverage on Japan's low birth rate is symptomatic of society's perspective of the ideal gender model. The term "parasite singles" became popularized in the 2000s, after sociologist Yamada Masahiro published his book, *Parasaito shinguru no jidai* [The Age of the Parasite

¹⁴ Masaaki Kameda, "Tokyo Assemblyman Leading Gender Equality Panel Apologizes for Sexist Remark," *The Japan Times*, September 18, 2014 (accessed May 18, 2017, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/09/18/national/tokyo-assemblyman-leading-gender-equality-panel-apologizes-sexist-remark/#.WR38nsYpC70>).

¹⁵ Ibid.

Singles].¹⁶ In addition to the status of singlehood, the term implies that young Japanese women are “too free and overly selfish,” and are “held responsible for the worsening economic crisis in Japan.”¹⁷ The term also does not consider the reasons for this type of alternative role or the obstacles to achieving the ideal. Suzanne Hall Vogel and Steven Kent Vogel, researchers of Japanese culture and political science, stated, “While the expression parasite single has a negative meaning, many Japanese people have no choice but to live with their parents well into adulthood for financial reasons.”¹⁸ The next section will further explore the impact of finances on women’s decision about childbearing, but the use of this derogatory term demonstrates the harsh social climate that women are subjected to when they do not conform to the idealized gender role.

Challenges to the Ideal Female Gender Model in Mass Media

Depictions of single, childless women are still uncommon in Japan, though these portrayals are becoming more prevalent. As time goes on, movies and television series are shifting away from the pattern of the ideal gender model and are adapting more to the contemporary reality. More often, female characters are shown as single, in their thirties or older, and pursuing careers, reflecting the increasing prevalence of this group. For instance, *Last Cinderella* is a Japanese drama that aired in 2013.¹⁹ The main character is a 39-year-old woman named Sakura Toyama. *Last Cinderella* acts as a forum to address existing views of gender ideals in Japanese society.

¹⁶ Yamada Masahiro, *Parasaito shinguru no jidai* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1999), 6.

¹⁷ Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan: An Ethnography of Real Lives and Consumerized Domesticity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 50, 194; and Lynne Nakano and Moeko Wagatsuma, “Mothers and Their Unmarried Daughters: An Intimate Look at Generational Change,” in Gordon Mathews and Bruce White, eds., *Japan’s Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 139.

¹⁸ Suzanne Hall Vogel and Steven Kent Vogel, *The Japanese Family in Transition: From the Professional Housewife Ideal to the Dilemmas of Choice* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 152.

¹⁹ Nakano Toshiyuki, *Last Cinderella*, television series, dir. Tanaka Ryo, Hirano Shin, and Sekino Munenori (Tokyo: Fuji Television, 2013).

The title itself implies the Western notion of a woman who goes from rags to riches solely because of her marriage but it is unclear if this was the intention of the show's writers. Sakura receives the pet name "Cinderella" from Hiroto, one of her love interests, because he found her shoe in a hotel stairwell after she had drunkenly tossed it aside. The word "last" also has several implications. For Sakura, society would say that this is her last chance to get married since she is turning forty. In a larger context, though, it could also mean that Cinderellas are a dying breed, due to alternative gender roles.

The show uses Sakura and Rintaro Tachibana, Sakura's male boss and later love interest, to exemplify the different views of male and female gender ideals. In one scene, Sakura and Rintaro happen to end up at the same restaurant. When Sakura orders a beer, Rintaro criticizes her, stating that she should be more modest because a woman should not drink alcohol in the middle of the day. The following translated dialogue ensues:

Sakura: "So you're saying that men can drink during the day but women can't?"

Rintaro: "If women act like men, there will be no distinction between the sexes."

Sakura: "There's nothing women aren't allowed to do that men are."

Rintaro: "That's why you can never be successful. No matter how much women have progressed, it's still a male-dominant society. Women that can't kiss up to men won't get far in their career or love life."²⁰

This dialogue verbalizes the problem that many women face, as women who do not conform to the ideal gender model are negatively impacted in other parts of their lives. This creates a dynamic situation where women are often forced to choose between having a career and having a family. The effect of employment on the lives of women and their childbearing decision will be covered in a later section as part of the external, institutional factors; however, *Last Cinderella* is an excellent example of how the influences discussed in this article can overlap. The film deals with both internal, public factors and external, institutional factors by representing the perceptions of

²⁰ Ibid.

an unmarried, childless woman in a profession on a television show. Equally important, it depicts a woman in what has become an alternative gender role, but in a very positive light.

Summary

Individual and public factors both deal with subjects that are internalized. Internal, public factors, however, specifically refer to the gendered propaganda in public spaces, mass media, and popular culture. Because of the easy access to a wide audience, internal, public factors can support the ideal gender model on a national level and are a strong influence on women to conform to it, which advocates for marriage and children.

Not all forms of mass media represent women as submissive housewives, however. Many television shows, books, and movies, like *Last Cinderella*, break away from the mold set by the idealized gender role by depicting real situations faced by women. More often, female characters are shown as single professionals in their thirties. These forms of entertainment also illustrate the social consequences for their lifestyles, such as the stigma of being forty and never married, as well as the personal conflict of not having a family but wanting one, something that resonates with women as they consider whether or not to have a child of their own.

Even though women are increasingly represented in entertainment with roles other than motherhood, those who do not fulfill the idealized gender role are still subject to social scrutiny. News coverage of Japan's low birth rate is highly suggestive of the stereotype for women to become mothers at an "appropriate" age, while women who remain unmarried and without children are labeled as "parasite singles." Thus, women are pushed to seek the protection of motherhood to avoid public reproach.

The existence of internal, public factors is an interesting social phenomenon, particularly because of the implication that private decisions like whether or not to have children are within the realm of public discourse. As a result, mass culture often stresses the ideal of women as mothers, yet frequently depicts them in alternative gender roles. With the birth rate as low as it currently is, the reinforcement of this ideal no longer appears to be effective. In fact, further partiality towards the idealized gender role seems to be detrimental to stimulating population growth by creating a distance between the existing lifestyles of women and the ideal that they are supposed to attain. The demands of motherhood in public perception are becoming increasingly incompatible with current realities.

External, Economic Factors: Personal and National Economies

External factors deal with the effect of the government, corporate, and economic establishments on society. This category is further separated into economic factors, referring to both private and public economies, and institutional factors, meaning the corporate and governmental impact on people's lives. This section will focus on how external, economic factors influence the lives of Japanese women and contributes to the internal-external binary struggle that women experience.

The Low Birth Rate and National Economy

Stabilizing the birth rate is necessary, especially considering the predictions for Japan's continued population decline. Japan's populace stood just under 127 million in 2015.²¹ The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare predicts that, without adequate intervention, the population will fall to 87 million by 2060, a decrease of about 32% of its current population.²²

In addition to a declining national population, Japan is aging. As of 2015, about 26% of the population was over the age of 65 and the rate is steadily increasing.²³ With a third of the population projected to be of retirement age in 2050, there is an increased demand for government programs, like social security and public health insurance, which are funded largely by the revenue generated by the workforce.²⁴

Additionally, a decline in the total population results in a reduction in the workforce population. Researchers have considered the effect of the aging population on Japan's economy by discussing the ratio of the population over the age of sixty-five to the workforce population, defined as ages twenty to sixty-four. They found that "in 2055 Japan, approximately

²¹ "Japan," World Bank (accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/japan>).

²² National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Department of Population Dynamics Research Japan, *Vital Statistics: Population Projections for Japan* (Japan Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2012).

²³ "Japan: Population Ages 65 and Above," World Bank (accessed March 6, 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP65U0T0.ZS?locations=J>).

²⁴ Robert Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population," in Magnus Blomström, Jennifer Corbett, Fumio Hayashi, and Anil Kashyap, eds., *Structural Impediments to Growth in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 205.

1.4 current workers will support one aged citizen, whereas, in 2000, 3.6 current workers supported one aged citizen.”²⁵ In the past, nearly four working individuals supported one non-working person. In contrast, future workers will need to support a retiree singlehandedly. This implies that the population in the workforce will be nearly equal to the population that is not working.

In other words, there is an increased expenditure from the growing elderly population, but less contribution from the shrinking workforce. Such a weight on the declining workforce would burden economic growth and induce a rise in public debt.²⁶ For this reason, there is a strong national motivation to increase the birth rate in order to improve economic prospects.

Personal Economy as a Hindrance to Improving the Birth Rate

Economic cost, however, is one of the leading reported causes for delayed marriage and childbearing among Japanese individuals.²⁷ Because the cost of raising children is significant, many women postpone marriage in order to delay having children, with the intention of saving money so that they can afford that phase of their life in the future.²⁸ This, however, results in a longer period of singlehood and less fertile years available for childbearing.

The high financial cost of raising children directly affects the population decline.²⁹ The cards begin to stack against the birth rate when a

²⁵ Thomas F. Cargill, and Takayuki Sakamoto, *Japan since 1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 259.

²⁶ Toshihiro Ihori, Ryuta Ray Kato, Masumi Kawade, and Shun-ichiro Bessho, “Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan,” in Keimei Kaizuka and Anne O. Krueger eds., *Tackling Japan's Fiscal Challenges: Strategies to Cope with High Public Debt and Population Aging*, (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan/International Monetary Fund, 2006), 30.

²⁷ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8.

²⁸ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 4; and Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 58–80.

²⁹ Sumiko Iwao, *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 265–282; and Seiritsu Ogura and Tamotsu Kadoda, “Effects of Public Policies and the Labor Market on the Fertility of Japanese Women: Analyses of Municipal Data,” in Noriyuki

couple first begins to consider getting married. The ideal gender model encourages women to leave the workforce upon marriage, a loss of income that contributes to the cost of married life. This is supported by a government survey, which found that one of the leading reasons for delayed or lack of interest in having children among singles is credited to the economic cost of marriage and childrearing. The survey states:

The [Japanese National Fertility] survey asked the never-married people who intend to get married what they saw as potential obstacles if they were to get married within a year. 'Money for marriage' was the most often selected answer for both men and women [43.5% for men, 41.5% for women].³⁰

There is a direct correlation between the cost of married life and the low birth rate, as economic costs are causing couples to get married and have children later in life. The survey explains, "Couples are meeting one another at older ages, the length of courtship has lengthened, and the trend of later marriage has further strengthened."³¹ As couples spend their youth saving up funds to have children or postponing the cost, there are less fertile years available to them to have children. Additionally, there is a positive correlation between the age group of female participants and the selection of "hate to bear children in older age" as an obstacle to having children (38%).³² This signifies that financial stability achieved later in life is not a motivator for childbirth for over a third of the population. It is necessary, therefore, to curb the costs of marriage and childrearing in order to facilitate initiating that stage of life during younger, more fertile years.

It is not only singles that affect the birth rate. Even among married couples, there is a discrepancy between the ideal number of children and the

Takayama, and Martin Werding, eds., *Fertility and Public Policy: How to Reverse the Trend of Declining Birth Rates* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 81–110.

³⁰ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8.

³¹ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 2.

³² *Ibid.*

actual number of children that a couple has. This is suggestive of further economic impediments to the birth rate. Many couples want two or more children but only have one or none. In addressing the high ideal number but low achievement, the survey stated that “although childbearing intentions continue to be present among young couples, those intentions are not realized,” largely credited to the economic cost.³³

In the idealized gender role, women must quit their jobs and rely on their husbands’ income, a deficit that contributes to the high cost of having children. Vogel and Vogel said, “Japanese society, especially before 1945, taught that a woman should always be financially dependent upon and obedient to a man – first her father, then her husband, and finally her son.”³⁴ Today, however, more women can make a living on their own. The financial autonomy available to unmarried, childless, working women is shown to be a strong motivator to maintain that status, since singlehood offers more financial and personal independence.

Summary

The lack of personal financial resources pulls women away from motherhood while national concerns over the threat of population and economic decline push for women to have more children. The individual cost of raising and educating children in Japan is significant, so many women postpone marriage to save the funds they will need for their potential children. The trend of deferring marriage to work towards economic achievement is embraced as a means to an end, even among those who seek to fulfill the idealized female gender role by becoming wives and mothers. Economic cost is one of the leading reported causes for delayed marriage and childbirth among Japanese individuals, with the economic hurdle growing greater after each child.³⁵

Once the decision to delay having children has been made, however, these women find themselves fulfilling an alternative gender role, which is

³³ Ibid, 10.

³⁴ Vogel and Vogel, *The Japanese Family in Transition*, 114.

³⁵ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 12; and Masahiro Hori, “The Expenditure on Children in Japan,” *Economic and Social Research Institute Discussion Paper Series 279* (Cabinet Office, 2011), 1.

further strengthened by the economic autonomy proffered by singlehood. In some cases, these women remain unmarried later in life because their dedication to achieving financial means has brought them past the age deemed appropriate for marriage. As mentioned in the previous section, these women are given derogatory labels without consideration for the economic causes of their situation.

Women who remain in the workforce are looked down upon by many conservatives for not following the ideal gender model, believing that their actions are the cause of the low birth rate. Yet, the Japanese government has found that the advancement of women in the workforce would not only bring more revenue to the state fund, but would potentially boost the birth rate.³⁶ As more of the population reaches the age of retirement and fewer children are born, the age gap widens, placing a greater weight on the workforce to provide for social programs. It is necessary to address the large government medical expenditure by increasing the workforce population through greater participation of women in order to generate revenue and thereby prevent a potentially high national debt that would grow in the coming decades.³⁷ For this reason, there is a strong national motivation to increase the birth rate in order to improve population growth and economic prospects.

External, Institutional Factors: Corporate Culture and Government Policies

This article defines external, institutional factors as the effect of businesses through corporate environment and the national, prefectural, and local governments through public policies on a woman's decision of whether or not to have children.

³⁶ Shinzo Abe, "Shinzo Abe: Unleashing the Power of 'Womenomics,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2013 (accessed July 18, 2017, http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/cpd/easg/easg_calendar/shinzo_abe__unleashing_the_power_of_womenomics_-_wsj.pdf); and Louis D. Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 205.

³⁷ Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population," 71; and Ihori, et al., "Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan," 30.

RANKINGS	JAPAN	SOUTH KOREA	UNITED STATES
Overall	111	116	45
Economic Participation and Opportunity	118	123	26
<i>Legislators, Senior Officials, and Managers</i>	113	114	11
Educational Attainment	76	102	1
<i>Literacy Rate</i>	1	66	1
Health and Survival	40	76	62
<i>Healthy Life Expectancy</i>	1	1	79
Political Empowerment	103	92	82
<i>Women in Parliament</i>	122	90	82

Figure 2. International Comparison of Rankings from the 2016 Global Gender Gap Report³⁸

Corporate Culture

According to the World Economic Forum's 2016 Global Gender Gap Report, Japan ranked 111th overall out of 144 countries, representing Japan's poor performance of gender equality by international standards.³⁹ In comparison, the United States ranked 45th and South Korea ranked 116th as illustrated in Figure 2.⁴⁰

The overall female participation rate in the labor force was reportedly 66%, compared to 85% for males, meaning that women have a more difficult time finding and maintaining a job than men, and reflecting the pressure for women to be homemakers.⁴¹ It also means that women face more obstacles than men in receiving a promotion. In addition, only 11% of working women participate in the economy as legislators, senior officials, and managers, compared to the 89% male participation, earning Japan the 113th rank in that category. This suggests the widespread nature of gender discrimination in the workforce that exists in Japan and sheds more light on the struggles that women experience.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2016" (accessed March 6, 2017, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/economies/#economy=JPN>).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The lower overall workforce participation rate by women can be directly linked to the ideal gender model. Lynne Nakano stated, "For men, both marriage and singlehood require continuous commitment to work. For women, in contrast, marriage generally involves a commitment to caring for children and husband while singlehood brings continuous full-time employment."⁴² Women are less represented in the workforce overall, with a noticeable decline in participation in their twenties and thirties, usually referred to as the M-curve.⁴³ In fact, scholars have attributed this dip in participation to the cultural norm of women leaving the workforce when they marry to become housewives and mothers.

The disparity in wages earned between the genders is also indicative of gender inequality in the Japanese corporate structure. Prime Minister Abe acknowledged that "Japanese women earn, on average, 30.2% less than men (compared with 20.1% in the U.S. and just 0.2% in the Philippines) [in 2013]."⁴⁴ Lower wages for women may be designed to encourage women to marry and depend on their husband's income but this is, in fact, contributing to the prevalence of delayed marriage. Single women must work several jobs to make ends meet and many couples simply cannot afford to get married and raise a child.

The apparent intention of this corporate environment is to reinforce the idealized female gender role of "good wives and wise mothers." More often, however, women are choosing to remain in the workforce longer, delaying marriage and motherhood instead.⁴⁵ Again, there is a dichotomy

⁴² Lynne Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan" in Satsuki Kawano, Glenda Susan Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long eds., *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 164.

⁴³ Leonard J. Schoppa, *Race for the Exits: The Unraveling of Japan's System of Social Protection* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 92; and Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 163.

⁴⁴ Abe, "Shinzo Abe: Unleashing the Power of 'Womenomics.'"

⁴⁵ Fumie Kumagai, *Families in Japan: Changes, Continuities, and Regional Variations* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 144; Jeff Kingston, *Contemporary Japan: History, Politics, and Social Change Since the 1980s* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 45; and Ezra Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 271.

between the intent and reality that contributes to women's struggles in balancing their personal and professional lives. It is an interesting fact that as companies attempt to reinforce the ideal gender model, which should boost the birth rate in theory, they are in fact alienating the ideal by making it harder to achieve. This is supported by the fact that the percentage of singles is on the rise, signifying that women are having a harder time finding partners and are dedicating themselves more to their companies for their livelihood.⁴⁶ The expectation of women to conform to the idealized gender role, thereby excluding them from the workforce, is an indication that the contemporary Japanese corporate environment is based on an outdated structural model and negatively affects the birth rate. Government and social intervention is needed to break the cycle, which can be accomplished via public policies and a change in social mentality.

Government Policies Aimed at Promoting Childbirth

In 2013, as part of his economic reform, Prime Minister Abe responded to the research that correlated the advancement of women in the workplace with an improvement in both the economy and birth rate by instituting several governmental changes. Only recently have pro-fertility policies looked at gender equality in the workplace.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the policies address issues in other areas of society and have since been revised to increase the number of nurseries available, provide greater financial support to parents, and improve government-sponsored eldercare programs.

As previously mentioned, women have been historically expected to provide care to their parents, husband, and children. Because of this, state-sponsored care programs for children and elderly are lacking, which is a growing concern as the role of women shifts from the ideal gender model. Due to the lack of nurseries available in urban settings, there is a long waitlist for families who are trying to enroll their children. The result of this waitlist is that mothers often must make the decision to leave their jobs and

⁴⁶ Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan," 164.

⁴⁷ Mizuho Aoki, "Diet Passes Bill Aimed at Boosting Women in the Workplace," *Japan Times*, August 28, 2015 (accessed December 23, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/08/28/national/politics-diplomacy/diet-passes-bill-aimed-boosting-women-workplace/#.VoQuCFIrdxV>).

stay home to take care of their child until they are accepted to a nursery, though this process can take years due to the long waitlist.

The government has sought to rectify this issue through social reform with the increased production of child care facilities, particularly in urban areas where the demand is higher. The government has attempted to address the public concern for limited daycare facilities, but has been unable to accommodate the demand. Thus, the availability of nurseries continues to influence a couple's decision to have a child.

Another government policy is the *jidō teate*, or Child Allowance System.⁴⁸ The economic cost for raising children is a strong deterrent to having children so it is important to note the government's efforts to combat economic challenges. In the Child Allowance program, families with children younger than three years old receive ¥15,000 each month (about \$133 in 2016). After a child turns three, families receive ¥10,000 (about \$88 in 2016) until the child graduates from junior high school.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, research has found that this support has "little impact on the average family's finances."⁵⁰ Although the Child Allowance System provides some monetary relief for parents, it is not enough to impact the significant cost of childrearing in Japan and continues to be a concern for women in their decision of whether or not to have a child.

Despite their aim at improving the birth rate, previous public policies have had little effect on population growth. Often, they were modelled after policies that were developed and proven effective in other countries. Recent research shows, however, that these policies have not been successful in Japan, implying an alternative cause for the low birth rate rather than poor policy-making.⁵¹ While the improvement of childcare and eldercare services acknowledges and alleviates the caregiving burden placed on women, society has turned to government-funded programs, rather than looking to male relatives to care for their families. The policies may be

⁴⁸ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Policy System of Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [Fundamental Goals, Grand Measure Goals, and Measure Goals], 2012 – 2016* (2012), 164.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 179.

⁵¹ Patricia Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility," *Population and Development Review* 34 (2008), 320.

ineffective because they seek to reinforce the ideal gender model, and do not address gender inequality in the corporate structure.

Summary

Japan ranks in the bottom quarter of global gender equality reports, signifying systemic gender inequality, especially in politics and business.⁵² Corporate environment idealizes men as employees and women as mothers, evident by the wage discrepancy between men and women, the lack of female representation in higher management positions, and the overall lesser percentage of female participation in the workforce.⁵³ Scholars have also commented on this systemic gender inequality, stating, “Japanese society will be forced to become a friendlier place for women, because of the declining population and the need to increase fertility rates, population, and the workforce.”⁵⁴ Current corporate environment places women in an either-or situation in which they are denied a balance between full-time employment and having a family, significantly influencing their decision of whether or not to have children. Such an environment supports the expectation of women to conform to the ideal gender model, thereby excluding them from the workforce. This suggests that the current corporate environment is based on an outdated structural model and negatively affects the low birth rate.

The Japanese government has responded to public concern for the low birth rate and has intervened through the development of a number of pro-fertility public policies. The development of more childcare and eldercare facilities, increased capacity for existing facilities, and greater economic support for parents have been utilized to encourage couples to have more children. While these policies seek to alleviate the encumbrance of care on women, they fortify the idealized gender role for women by excluding men from such caregiving roles. The government has also been unable to adequately deal with gender inequality in the corporate environment, as well, as stated by Susan Holloway:

⁵² World Economic Forum, “Global Gender Gap Report 2016 – Japan.”

⁵³ Boling, “Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan’s Low Fertility,” 316; Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 92; Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 163; and Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*, 153.

⁵⁴ Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 259.

The government has had less success, however, in compelling employers to eliminate sexist employment practices that prevent women from staying in the labor force after having a child; nor has there been much progress in creating a culture of work that doesn't preclude the worker's participation in family life.⁵⁵

Most pro-fertility public policies target working mothers and do not focus on single women or men. However, the government has started to draft new policies in the past couple years which aim to encourage male participation in childrearing and limit overtime work.⁵⁶ Perhaps this new direction will yield greater results at improving population growth, considering it makes a stronger effort than previous attempts to foster marriage and father involvement in childrearing. Along with the improved policies, a government campaign showing men as fathers and caregivers in a positive way could help to change gender views such that a caregiving father would be socially acceptable and desirable, especially among companies. This shift from the ideal gender model is the key to improving gender equality and the birth rate.

Conclusion

Aiko's Story

Susan Holloway, a Child Development and Education scholar who researched Japanese mothers, created an imaginary situation to "envision how conditions in contemporary Japanese society affect young women contemplating marriage and family life," which she describes as thus:

An imaginary young college student named Aiko falls into casual conversation with Chihiro, the frustrated mother in our study. When Aiko mentions that she is studying consumer sciences at a nearby university,

⁵⁵ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 5; and R. L. Miller, "The Quiet Revolution: Japanese Women Working around the Law," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 26 (2003): 163–215.

⁵⁶ Japan Times, "Cabinet Seeks to Raise Percentage of Men Taking Paternity Leave to 80% by 2020," March 20, 2015 (accessed July 27, 2017, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/03/20/national/cabinet-seeks-to-raise-percentage-of-men-taking-paternity-leave-to-80-by-2020/#.WXpD7-kpC70>).

Chihiro begins to describe her former exciting career as a professional in the field of industrial design. She goes on to chronicle her subsequent departure from the workplace when it became apparent how difficult it would be to manage the job and perform all her household duties with little help from her husband. She describes her persistent sense of failure as a mother, her feeling of estrangement from her husband, and her boredom at her part-time job.⁵⁷

By the end of the conversation, Aiko has decided to “postpone the inevitable choice [between marriage and career] by waiting as long as possible to give in to her boyfriend’s desire to get married.”⁵⁸

The narrative accurately describes the interconnection and impact of the various factors discussed in this article. Although Holloway does not mention the fact that the ideal gender model is reiterated to Aiko through internal, public factors like mass media, the other factors are present in this short story. Internal, individual factors are present in that Aiko now has a personal relationship with the frustrated mother Chihiro, who is unconsciously encouraging Aiko to forgo the ideal gender model. External, economic factors are implied in that Chihiro has taken on a part-time job presumably for the additional income, since it is not for her enjoyment. And finally, external, institutional factors are present in the struggle that Chihiro experienced in trying to balance work and family. This story exemplifies the many influences on a woman’s decision of whether or not to have a child and the systemic nature of Japan’s low birth rate.

There is not any single element responsible for the low birth rate. As seen in Aiko’s story, it is the culmination of Chihiro’s conversation that influences Aiko’s decision to delay marriage, rather than a single detail. Furthermore, increased reinforcement of the ideals does not improve the birth rate, but in fact further alienates women from becoming mothers. Public discourse acknowledges the issue as a national concern in terms of its widespread nature, but ignores the national causes and points the finger at women as the cause. Considering some of the different aspects of Japanese society, it is clear that the low birth rate is an outcome from the systemic problem that occurs when the factors discussed here occur simultaneously in society.

⁵⁷ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 213.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Internal Factors

Redefining the ideal female gender model in Japan would be no easy task. While the adage “good wife, wise mother” is not so frequently used to describe Japanese women today, the conservative notion lingers.⁵⁹ The remnants of this conservative belief can be seen in the sentiments of some politicians and media figures, who blame women for the population decline and criticize them for not fulfilling the female gender ideal by labeling them “parasite singles,” among other things.⁶⁰

The ideal gender model emphasizes the importance that women should place on being a caregiver, not only to their husbands and children, but parents, as well. Consequently, a woman's personal relationships are a contributing factor in her decision about childbearing that is counteracting the intense pressure to conform to the ideal gender model. The burden of caregiving to husband, parents, in-laws, and potential children that is expected of women is great enough to discourage women from having children, and in some cases from getting married in the first place, as seen in the imaginary scenario with Chihiro and Aiko.⁶¹

As more women choose not to or are unable to fulfill the idealized gender role, women in popular media are being represented in alternative roles at higher rates. More often, female characters are shown as single, in their thirties, and focusing on their careers, as seen in *Last Cinderella*, demonstrating the increasing frequency of these lifestyles. These alternative characters, and the women who lead similar lives in the real world, are still subject to criticism and are encouraged to have children to avoid disapproval from the public.⁶²

External Factors

Women are not always choosing to forgo the idealized gender role of wife and mother, but sometimes have that choice made for them. The hurdles to achieving marriage and motherhood sometimes prove too great to overcome, leading women away from the idealized female gender role, as shown in Aiko's story. Aiko saw the struggles that Chihiro went through in balancing work and family, with Chihiro's career eventually losing out. Rather than blame women for the low birth rate, as some critics do, one

⁵⁹ Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows*, 6.

⁶⁰ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 123.

⁶¹ Boling, “Demography, Culture, and Policy,” 318.

⁶² Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 123.

scholar suggests that “attempts to address the issue of the declining birth rate need to consider a complicated set of issues, some structural and some related to discourses about work and parenting.”⁶³

Economic and institutional influences are among the most reported reasons for later or unrealized marriages and children. While improving the status of both national and personal economies, women who remain in the workforce are the subject of criticism for not having children, despite the conditions that place women in an either-or situation in choosing between work and family.⁶⁴ Conversely, women who leave the workforce to have children are upholding the ideal gender model by becoming mothers but are also aware of the penalty incurred to their personal economy, as seen in Chihiro’s situation from the imaginary scenario. Not only is the direct cost of raising children significant, but the loss of potential income caused when mothers leave the workforce must also be considered. The decision to choose between a personal life and professional pursuits, and the lack of compatibility between the two, contributes to the lack of population growth and has built the fork in the road of women’s lives between the idealized and alternative female gender roles.

Current corporate environment limits a person’s involvement in their family life, driving the division of labor between parents and promoting idealized gender roles for both men and women.⁶⁵ Women are excluded from the labor force and men are excluded from a life with their families, which was also seen in Holloway’s story of the frustrated mother Chihiro. A large portion of Chihiro’s frustration stemmed from this division of labor. If corporate environment reflects the larger condition of women, then addressing gender inequality will aid in equalizing the status of men and women in Japan, both at home and in the office. Tending to this issue will not only allow for a growth in the economy through more active participation by women in the workforce, but also a growth in the population through more active participation of men in childrearing. Although the Japanese government has acknowledged that childbirth is a matter of individual choice, government and corporations have the greatest influence on the lives of the Japanese citizens, and therefore should be the leaders of

⁶³ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 214.

⁶⁴ Kumagai, *Families in Japan*, 144; Kingston, *Contemporary Japan*, 45; and Vogel, *Japan’s New Middle Class*, 271.

⁶⁵ Boling, “Demography, Culture, and Policy,” 316–317.

this change. Hence, this change should not focus on improving the population, but on removing impediments that adversely impact its citizens' lives.

Final Remarks

The dichotomy between the male and female idealized gender roles has long been socially acceptable and is reinforced through corporate environment and social practices. Japan will need to blur the line dividing gender roles in order to boost marriage rates, improve the birth rate, and curb the decline in Japan's total population that is foreseen in the coming decades. The results of the contrasting roles are evident in the fact that "couples are meeting one another at older ages, the length of courtship has lengthened, and the trend of later marriage has further strengthened."⁶⁶ The prevalence of delayed marriage has taken a toll on the national birth rate, and shows that men are having as difficult a time of finding a partner and having children as women.

It is important to view the low birth rate as a systemic issue and as the responsibility of society. If Japan continues to firmly uphold the ideal gender model, the birth rate will not improve, and all the warnings from scholars of economic debt and predictions of population decline will likely come true. The decline in the birth rate should not be the sole responsibility of women, but should be looked at as a national concern with a national solution. Unless Japan can enact a social change that allows more similarities between the roles of men and women, it is unlikely that there will be an improvement to the birth rate. Thus, Japan must bridge the gap between gender ideals and equalize the status of men and women to achieve an improvement in the birth rate. In order to achieve this equilibrium, Japan must institute strong pro-fertility public policies and encourage a change in social mentality that is more accepting of working mothers and caregiving fathers. In time, greater gender equality can be achieved, which will inevitably stabilize the birth rate.

⁶⁶ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 2.