

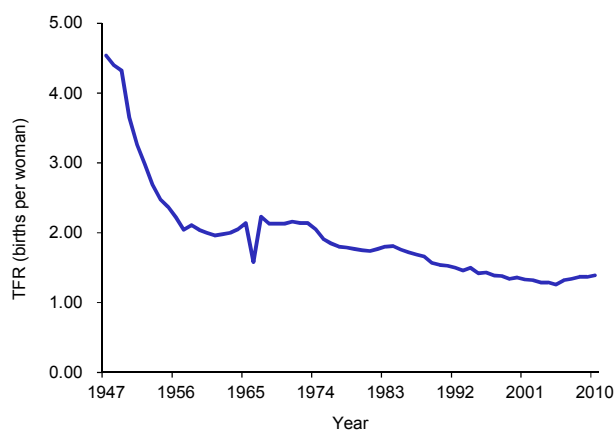
## Government response to low fertility in Japan

Policy Brief No. 11

Japan has experienced two fertility transitions. The first, a decline to the replacement level of about 2.1 children per woman shortly after World War II, and the second, a decline since the mid-1970s to very low rates of 1.3 to 1.4 children per woman. According to Japan's latest official population projection, the country's population is projected to decrease from 128 million in 2010 to 87 million by 2060, when roughly 40 per cent of the population will be age 65 and above.

While the first fertility transition was due primarily to declining rates of childbearing among married couples, the second transition has been strongly associated with decreasing rates of marriage. It now looks like substantial numbers of Japanese women and men will never marry or have children. As of 2010, 11 per cent of women and 20 per cent of men at age 50 had never been married.

**Total fertility rate (TFR), Japan 1947–2010**



Note: Fertility dipped temporarily in 1966, a “fire horse” year when it is considered unlucky to give birth to a girl.

As Japan's social systems have been designed with family as the primary safety net, a rapid expansion of the population of single men and women has profound implications for Japan's economy and society.

### Why are Japanese men and women not marrying and not having children?

Later marriage and non-marriage have most likely arisen, at least in part, from growing employment opportunities for young women and shrinking opportunities for young men. The proportion of women age 20–24 with higher education has risen steadily, from 6 per cent in 1960 to 60 per cent in

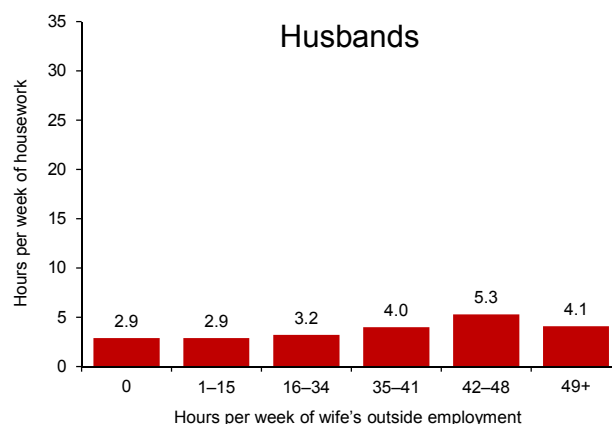
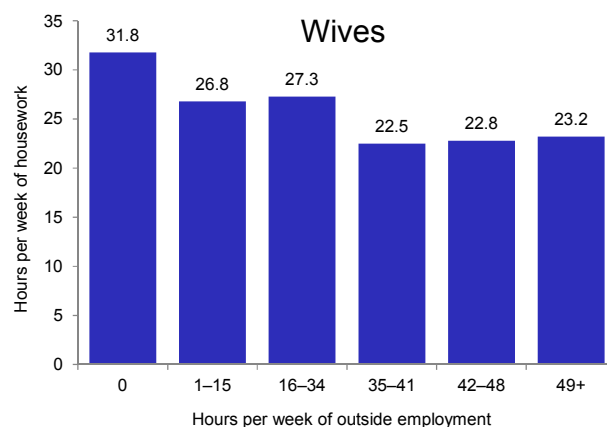
2010, and since the mid-1970s, women's employment rates have also increased rapidly.

Over the same period, men's employment rates have declined slowly but steadily, and a larger proportion of employed young men are in temporary jobs, very likely affecting their marriage prospects. If these factors are indeed militating against marriage, Japan's fertility is likely to remain very low for some time to come.

### A “marriage package” that is particularly unattractive for young women

The persistence of the traditional gender division of labour in Japanese marriages places heavy obligations on women for household maintenance and childcare.

**Wives' and husbands' average housework hours per week by wives' weekly employment hours, Japan, 2009**



Apart from household tasks, parenting in Japan tends to be particularly intensive, and it is overwhelmingly the mother who is responsible for looking after children and making sure they succeed in the highly competitive education system.

In 2009, Japanese wives at reproductive ages spent an average of 27 hours per week on household tasks, while husbands spent only 3 hours per week. Roughly 60 per cent of these wives were employed, and about one half of those who were employed worked 35 hours or more per week. Given that many of these employed wives were also mothers, they undoubtedly faced difficulties in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

### **Government response growing but still inadequate**

Apart from improving gender relations in the home, the most promising option for reversing the downward trend of marriage and childbearing seems to be through policies and programmes that help couples balance their work and domestic roles. Since the early 1990s, the Japanese Government has expanded family policies and programmes in three areas: (1) childcare services; (2) parental leave schemes; and (3) monetary assistance in the form of child allowances.

Beginning in 1994, the Government has implemented a succession of programmes designed to provide more childcare services and encourage the workplace to become more family friendly. The number of places available in day-care centres and the number of children enrolled have both increased since 2000, but the number of children on waiting lists has also gone up. This suggests that the demand for childcare services is growing faster than the supply. In particular, there is an acute shortage of childcare services in large metropolitan areas.

Beginning in 1992, the Government has offered 12 months of parental leave for parents who meet minimum work requirements. Income compensation was added in 1995 and is now paid at 50 per cent of monthly salary prior to the beginning of leave. Japan's parental leave scheme has major shortcomings, however, including limited coverage, relatively low level of income compensation and, most importantly, lack of legally binding authority. A substantial proportion of employers have not formulated specific policies regarding parental leave, especially among small organizations.

Launched in 1972, a child allowance scheme initially covered third and higher-order children in households with incomes

below a certain threshold. The duration of payment was from a child's birth to graduation from junior high school. Since then, although still income tested, the scheme has been expanded to cover first and second births. The amount of the allowance has also increased, although it is still relatively small compared with levels offered in Western Europe.

### **Families still strained and fertility remains low**

Despite these efforts, Japan's family policy so far appears to have been largely ineffective. Strains on parents, especially working mothers, have not been significantly alleviated and fertility has remained very low. Comparing 18 member countries, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ranked Japan second from the bottom in terms of coverage and strength of policies for work-family reconciliation and family-friendly work arrangements, pointing out that Japan's childcare coverage and parental leave offered by employers are both especially weak.

This suggests that it is critically important for the Japanese Government to strengthen efforts to help working parents of small children by expanding affordable childcare services. It is also important to make the workplace more flexible and family friendly, including changing Japan's corporate culture that emphasizes long work hours. Given the serious, long-term demographic and socioeconomic consequences of very low fertility, Japan has little choice but to strengthen policies and society-wide efforts to help women and couples make work and family life more compatible.

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#### NOTES

This policy brief was prepared as background material for the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Policy Responses to Low Fertility. It can be found online at <http://esa.un.org/PopPolicy/publications.aspx>. Queries can be sent to [PopPolicy@un.org](mailto:PopPolicy@un.org).

The brief is based on Noriko O. Tsuya (2015), *Below-replacement fertility in Japan: Patterns, factors, and policy implications*. In Ronald R. Rindfuss and Minja Kim Choe (Eds.), *Low and Lower Fertility: Variations across Developed Countries*. Springer.

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or the East-West Center.

Financial support from Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA) to conduct the research on which this policy brief is based is gratefully acknowledged.