

Explanations of very low fertility in Asia

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Persistence of very low fertility

- Fertility has remained at very low levels in those Asian societies in which fertility fell in the past to below 1.5 births per woman. This includes Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore.
- Now China also has joined this group and perhaps Thailand is on the way.
- Among legislators in Iran, there is a concern that Iran is heading in the same direction.

Potential explanations

- Four potential explanations are discussed in this presentation:
 - 1. perceptions of economic risk among young people
 - 2. the high costs of children, particularly education costs
 - 3. excessive demands on workers by employers including insecure contracts and,
 - 4. low levels of gender equity.

The argument of the presentation

- The essential argument that I shall make is that it is likely that multiple explanations apply across these societies and that the strength of each potential explanation varies across societies.
- This is suggested by the varying patterns of fertility in each society in relation to:
 - The proportion marrying
 - The age at marriage
 - The proportion having three or more children
 - The proportions having one child

Japan: the longest standing case

- Japan is in the fortunate situation of having five-year national fertility surveys that provide a great deal of detail, at least on the fertility behaviour and attitudes of married couples.
- Japan stands out as different from the other examples to be discussed because of the relatively high proportions of married women who have had three or more children. This percentage has only recently fallen below 20%. This percentage has been falling slowly across time.
- We can speculate that this is because Japan was not subject to the powerful family planning programme propaganda against having three or more children that occurred in the other societies.

Japan: the high costs of children

- Japanese married women have consistently said that they do not have more children because of the high costs of children.
- We can consider this response as relating to having three or more children rather than to having one or two children because most married women making this response have two children or intend to do so.
- So, the continuing fall in the percentage having three or more motivated by the perceived high costs of children is an important element in the continuation of very low fertility in Japan.

Women with one or no children in Japan

- Japan's fertility would be above 1.5 if the current relatively high percentage with three or more children was not accompanied by a large fall in the proportions marrying and the very late age at marriage of many Japanese women and men.
- An increasingly higher percentage of Japanese women have no children or one child.
- It is in this respect that the other three explanations of very low fertility become pertinent in Japan.

The data

Year	Japanese Females: Percent Never Married		
	25-29	35-39	45-49
1970	18	6	4
1980	24	6	4
1990	40	8	5
2000	54	14	6
2010	60	23	13

Non-marriage and late marriage: the low end of the scale

- The surveys of single people suggest that Japanese men on the lower end of the socio-economic scale and in 'irregular' jobs have difficulty attracting a wife and delay marriage if they are in a relationship. They have a high perception of economic risk.
- These men also have very low perceptions of gender equity and this is part of the reason they are unable to attract a partner. Finally, it is suggested that the nature of their work in small businesses, etc. means that they have difficulty meeting women.
- Policy approach? Not easy.

Non-marriage and late marriage: the high end of the scale

- On the other end of the social scale are the highly educated and well-employed single women. They are very concerned about the impact that marriage and children would have upon their work and their independence, both of which they enjoy as single women.
- They also are very concerned about gender equity within the household. The Japan data continues to show a massive change in women's household work when they marry and no change from a very low base for men. At these higher levels, employers also put very substantial demands on the time of their employees both men and women but particularly men and this makes it difficult for men to be more family-oriented.
- Policy options? Here, there are more options available and Japan has moved in some of these directions.

Noriko Tsuya 2015

- ‘The most viable ways to reverse the downward trends of marriage and fertility seem to be through making the gender division of household labor more equal, and helping, policy-wise, Japanese couples balance work and family roles’.
- She reports that access to child care remains problematic in larger cities and she draws attention to the huge housework imbalances between married women and single women and much more so between married women and all men.

Australia and Japan compared

- Australia also has a high percentage with 3+ children. Its marital status situation is very similar to Japan. Women's labour force participation is also similar. So what's different?

	Percentage of Women Never Married		
	25-29	35-39	45-49
Japan 2010	60	23	13
Australia 2011	61	26	14

Policy for Japan

- Japan needs to try to hold on to the positive aspects of its present fertility patterns: relatively high percentages with three or more children and a high percentage of married couples having two children. These are being whittled away slowly and this will place downward pressure on Japan's fertility rate.
- Policies that hang on to these positives may also induce higher fertility.
 - Employers being more family-oriented
 - Men being more family-oriented
 - Improve access to child care
 - Being able to work part-time in your own job, not just in low level jobs.

South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong

- Very vigorous family planning programmes that portrayed 3+ children as irresponsible and unsocial behaviour – against the interests of the broader society.
- Very low percentages with 3+ children and society has changed so that 3+ children are extremely difficult to manage.- small apartments, etc. Low marriage rates and ensuing high percentages with zero and one child are not balanced by a high 3+ proportion as in Japan.
- Like Japan, employers are very family unfriendly and access to child care is problematic. Men's contributions at home are probably a bit better than in Japan but still not great.

Singapore

- Similar story to South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong and similar policy directions are relevant.
- But Singapore has two substantial differences: mixed ethnicity and a level of immigration that is even higher than Australia's high immigration.
- The difference with Australia is that Australia allows its immigrants to settle and, hence, to have children. 43% of all births in Australia have at least one parent born outside Australia. A similar approach in Singapore would make a major contribution to births in Singapore but
- The demographic fallacy of the Singapore approach is that, while births remain low, increasingly larger numbers of immigrants are required to keep the labour force constant. Over time, the population consists ever increasingly of temporary residents.

Iran

- Marriage remains early and high proportions marry (90%).
- Still relatively high percentages with 3+ children.
- Iranian men are relatively good contributors at home. Women's labour force participation remains relatively low.
- For the time being, our view is that fertility will not fall to very low levels.
- But family support policies are relevant to support fertility around replacement level.

China

- Very much more complex because of its diversity.
- Urban eastern China.
- Yingchun Ji, Shenwei Sun and Peter McDonald:
 - a gender equity perspective is crucial for understanding the current low fertility in the urban eastern Chinese context. The two-child family policy is expected to affect various aspects of gender equality in China. Without gender equity oriented policies and institutional change, we are doubtful that a substantial fertility increase will occur in the near future.