

WHY DOES THE DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS PERSIST IN JAPAN?

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Abstract: Global demographic shifts, marked by below-replacement fertility rates in numerous nations, are significantly influencing economies and cultures, especially in countries like Italy, Japan, and Germany. This study examines the circumstances in Japan, where the fertility rate reached a historic low of 1.20 in 2023, resulting in immediate implications for the demographic composition and workforce. This study examines the fundamental causes of this trend, emphasising work culture, the correlation between marriage and fertility, and current initiatives aimed at addressing demographic and socioeconomic issues.

Key words: Japan; demographic changes; fertility; marriage; work culture; loneliness, measures

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INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing significant demographic changes. Approximately two-thirds of the global population has fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. The demographic transition has significant implications in countries like Italy, Japan, and Germany, characterized by low fertility rates and a rising population of individuals aged 65 and older, attributable to increased life expectancy. The main effect of this phenomenon is the decline in the

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working population, which mainly affects the economic and social systems (Stanley, 2024). Accordingly, this paper is aimed at examining the factors contributing to the demographic crisis in Japan. After the second baby boom from 1971 to 1974, the number of annual births in Japan steadily declined as the second baby-boom generation reached the age of having children of their own. In 2007, it was the first time that the number of births fell below the number of deaths, reaching a record low fertility rate of 1.20 in 2023 (Nippon.com, 2024) (among the lowest in the G7, although still higher than other Asian countries like South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore) (Asao, Smirnov, & Xu, 2024).

How did Japan arrive at the precipice of this crisis? This paper aims to address this question and highlight Japan's demographic situation by analysing contributing factors, emphasizing work culture and its impacts, the Japanese perspective on marriage and family formation, and recent regulations intended to tackle demographic and social issues. Moreover, the authors argue in favour of the existence of a causal nexus between the Japanese perception of marriage, the feelings of loneliness, the work culture and the persistently low fertility rate in the country.

METHODS

From a methodological point of view, we used both quantitative and qualitative research methods, so as to delimit the basic concepts of our research, the specific theories, and to better highlight the social policy at the level of Japan, analysing in comparison to other models of social policies in the EU (Norway, Sweden, Germany), with the aim of highlighting some of the major causes of the demographic problems faced by Japan, in particular, and developed countries, in general. The research methods used are as presented below.

Analysis of social documents – we conducted a comprehensive analysis of official documents and reports, statistical data and specialized studies developed by national and international institutions such as the National Population and Social Security Research Institute, the Gender Equality Bureau, the OECD and the Pew Research Centre. These sources provided important demographic, social and economic data, used to track the evolution of the population and social policies in Japan and selected European countries.

Specialized literature – for the theoretical basis of the work and for the correlation of specific concepts and theories with empirical data, we turned to works of reference authors, such as Chihiro Iwawaki, Noreena Hertz, Tomas Sobotka, Anna Matysiak & Zuzanna Brzozowska.

Ex-post evaluation – analysing public policies, rules and regulations in Japan and selected European countries, we have highlighted positive and negative elements of Japanese social policy in order to propose improvements in this direction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

THE NEXUS BETWEEN MARRIAGE, LONELINESS AND FERTILITY RATE IN JAPAN

As highlighted by the National Population and Social Security Research Institute, by 2070, Japan's population (approx. 126 million in 2020) is anticipated to decrease by 30% (to 87 million), and the elderly population 65+ is expected to account for almost 40% of the total (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2023). One of the main causes is the low fertility rate. Japanese society is against children out of wedlock. Therefore, marriage is a prerequisite for having children, but the number of marriages is decreasing. Moreover, contemporary society is characterized by smaller family units, thus fertility rates are declining. But why are there fewer marriages in Japan? This happens for several reasons.

First, young people choose work over family life. Men tend to make this choice because of job instability. According to a survey undertaken by the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training in 2019, young men tend to quit within the first 3 years of employment citing the following reasons (Iwawaki, 2024):

- long working hours
- low wages
- disparity between the actual working conditions and the information they were provided prior to their employment
- unpaid overtime
- harassment
- lack of communication
- insufficient financial resources
- the desire to maintain their financial autonomy.

Added to this is the desire to consume which is on the rise. Surveys, such as the one conducted by PEW Research Centre in 2006, show that young people are very sensitive to the influence of advertising. The advertising industry promotes the consumption of products, especially expensive brands, which young people may see as the only way to self-esteem and happiness. Consumption aspirations are growing strongly, but the purchasing power of younger workers is, in a good case, growing modestly, making personal satisfaction with the level of consumption hard to achieve. (Skirbekk, Matsukura, & Naohiro, 2014) As a consequence, if the job is insecure, many young people lack the security of a stable income. Given the necessary expenses (housing, food, transportation), the prospect of marriage and raising a child, which entails more expenses, is postponed until later years or even cancelled.

Women make this choice because of gender inequality. They are reluctant when it comes to starting a family because (1) men offer too little support with housework and parenting - because of the work culture, which discourages taking time off, and men's tendency to engage in very little unpaid work. Then, (2) because the work culture, being strict, offers inflexible working hours, which makes women choose more flexible jobs (part-time, seasonal, etc.), but which prevents them from pursuing their desired career and excelling (Asao, Smirnov, & Xu, 2024). Also, (3) because the traditional idea that the husband should provide for the family, and the wife should take care of the household duties is still ingrained in Japanese society (CNA Insider, 2024). The statement of a Showa University student describes the whole situation very well: "When you have a child in Japan, the husband continues to work, but the mother is expected to quit her job and take care of the children. I feel it is hard to raise children, financially, mentally and physically" (McCurry, 2022).

As a result, the prospects of starting a family are pushed to the back burner, postponed or, in some cases, even rejected. A 2023 survey of unmarried people aged between 20 and 49, which included valid responses from 1,200 people, found that 34.1% of them had never been in a relationship. Also, only 49.3% of women and 43.5% of men said they wanted to get married at some point of their life. The most common reasons young people gave for rejecting the idea of marriage were that "imposes limits on my activities and life" (among women) and "loss of financial freedom" (among men). Others included "see no benefit", "don't want to lose my freedom", "burden of responsibility to support the family", "don't feel the need" (Nippon.com, 2024).

Second, the balance between work and personal life is increasingly tipping towards the former, as work occupies an increasingly significant part of an individual's life. This is visible at global level as well, because contemporary society is characterized by the values of neoliberal capitalism, which emphasizes productivity, efficiency and personal success, and the individual is in a constant competition to perform, to exceed their limits and to achieve as much as possible financially and materially (Han, 2024). Such values are emphasized in a society such as Japan, where extreme dedication to work is considered a sign of loyalty and respect for the company, and employees are expected to work overtime, often without pay. This behaviour has been normalized in Japanese culture, and a lack of work-life balance leads to extreme burnout and even fatal situations. For example, in 2013, the journalist Miwa Sado died of cardiac arrest after logging 159 hours of overtime and only two days off in the month before her death. Another notable case is that of a 24-year-old woman, Matsuri Takahashi, who had logged more than 100 hours of overtime in a

month and committed suicide. A few weeks before, she had written on a social media platform, "I want to die" and "I am physically and mentally destroyed" (McCurry, 2017). The cases stated are not unique. In fact, the phenomenon is quite widespread, and the Japanese have a specific term for it: "karoshi" (meaning "death caused by overwork") (NowThis, 2017).

These cases illustrate the harmful effects of a toxic work culture, of which main interests are productivity and profit, and less the well-being of employees. This disposition has significant repercussions not only for the individual's mental well-being but also for societal cohesion. People, being trapped in their egocentric loop, become individualistic and tend to isolate themselves from others. As a result, they are lonelier, and sadly this has become a global trend. In 2023, the World Health Organization declared loneliness a "global health threat" (BJC HealthCare, 2024).

Third, the Japanese society is confronting with the challenge of loneliness. According to a national survey from 2022, out of the total respondents, 4.5% said they felt lonely "often/always", 14.5% "sometimes", 17.4% "occasionally", 38.9% "hardly ever" and 23.7% "never" (Office for Policy on Loneliness and Isolation, 2025). Generalizing to the entire population of Japan, it would mean that about 5.6 million citizens feel lonely often or always, 18 million feel lonely sometimes and 21.5 million feel lonely occasionally. These statistics are worrying because the effects of loneliness can have a significant negative impact on individuals and society. Firstly, loneliness and social isolation affect health. People in this situation are more prone to both simple illnesses, such as colds or flu, and serious ones: the risk of heart disease, stroke, clinical dementia and premature death is 29%, 32%, 64%, respectively 30% higher (Hertz, 2021). Studies also show that due to the stress caused, individuals who experience loneliness are more vulnerable to mental health affections, including anxiety, depression, cognitive impairment and feelings of hopelessness, as well as self-harm or suicide (Klein, et al., 2021). The reverse scenario is also true - poor health exacerbates loneliness and social isolation tendencies - so a vicious cycle is created in which the two phenomena are both causes and symptoms. Suicide is another problem in Japanese society, where more than 20 000 people take their own lives each year (Japan Suicide Countermeasures Promotion Center, 2021).

In addition, the loneliness is often closely linked to another widespread phenomenon in Japan, namely the "hikikomori" phenomenon. According to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, this is a condition in which an individual refrains from engaging in social activities, such as school, employment, or socializing outside of the home, for a duration exceeding six months (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare of Japan, 2020). The phenomenon usually occurs following events that cause excessive stress or negative feelings and can impel the individual to no longer want to interact with society because they feel overwhelmed, and isolation becomes a refuge or escape from reality rather than a rational choice. For example, in the 1990s, when Japan was hit by the economic crisis, the number of jobs was reduced and competition in academia intensified, which put immense pressure on individuals because the risk of not getting a job was very high. Many young people were also left without jobs. In Japan, there is an efficient school-work system that helps graduates to get a job immediately after graduation, but it is vulnerable to periods of economic distress, hence the close link between reduced job vacancies and increased competitiveness in school (Iwawaki, 2024). In response to stressors, an increasing number of young people have isolated themselves, avoiding interaction with society.

Hikikomori persons can return to society and, despite the stigma that they are just lazy and don't want to contribute to society or that they are mentally ill, many of them manage to come back. Solutions exist (e.g. home visits, community outreach, hospitalization and psychotherapy), however these take time (Teo, 2010).

The correlation between marriage and fertility is directly proportional, as the Japanese culture disapproves of children born out of wedlock; hence, both marriage and fertility rates are dropping due to a significant number of individuals opting for or ultimately leading a solitary lifestyle. As a result, the number of marriages is declining - in 2023, there were 474,717 marriages (it was the first time in the post-war era that the number of marriages fell below 500,000) (Nippon.com, 2024). In

the same way, the number of elderly people who have no one by their side is also increasing. According to a study by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, as of June 2023, there were 54,452,000 households, of which 34% (18,495,000) were inhabited by single persons (only one person); 24.8% (13,516,000) by married couples with unmarried children; 24.6% (13,395,000) by married couples. Also, of all one-person households, 46.2% were inhabited by people over 65, of whom 64.4% were women and 35.6% were men (Nippon.com, 2024). The increasing number of lonely elderly is leading to another phenomenon, called "kodokushi". This is when a person dies alone, with no one to care for him/her, the body being found after a longer period of time (weeks, months; often found because of the smell) (Byard, 2025).

Thus, the demographic crisis extends beyond mere population decline. It is linked to many other problems that are both causes and consequences. Constantly feeding on each other, they worsen the demographic, economic and social situation, with repercussions for the individual's health and also for social cohesion (Jones, 2024). In these circumstances, it is reasonable to inquire about the measures the Japanese government is implementing to ameliorate the situation, and what interventions might help. The following part of the study will focus on the government's initiatives and their effectiveness concerning various issues - family and birth rate, work culture, loneliness and migration.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND MEASURES MEANT TO TACKLE THE DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

Government initiatives to promote family establishment and childbirth

The Nippon government has generally focused on social assistance measures to encourage family formation and childbirth - a prime example is the "New Dimension" policy of former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet, which proposed measures such as monthly payments for families with young children, a reduction in the costs for higher education, an increase in the percentage of men who take paternity leave, etc (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2024). The last mentioned regulation related to paternity leave deserves more attention as a measure of this type has been effective in other countries such as Norway and Sweden. In 1993 and 1995 respectively, they introduced the "daddy quota" scheme, whereby the family loses paid parental leave if the father does not take leave. This provides a strong financial incentive for fathers to take paternity leave. Following implementation, the take-up rate has increased from 4% (1995) to over 90% (2003) in Norway and almost 90% in Sweden. Germany also adopted a model similar to the Nordic one in 2007, and in 2015 they introduced a flexible leave system whereby parents can take part-time leave for up to 36 months (Asao, Smirnov, & Xu, 2024). According to researchers like Sobotka, Matysiak, and Brzozowska (2020), fertility rates among highly educated women have increased due to this type of policy reform.

Such a policy could also pay off in Japanese society, given that Japan has a generous parental leave scheme: about a year of paid paternity leave, at 61% of salary for the first 180 days, with a limit of about 305 000 yen (€1903) per month, and 50% of salary after 180 days, with a limit of about 228 000 yen (€1422) per month (Kimoto, 2025). The issue is that few fathers take paternity leave in 2022, the average duration was less than 6 weeks (Asao, Smirnov, & Xu, 2024). A "daddy quota" policy could change this, helping to reduce the work-life imbalance by primarily supporting mothers because the burden of raising a child, in addition to other household chores, would be eased by fathers' presence and involvement. This could also mean a more positive outlook for women towards starting a family. Moreover, there are benefits for fathers too, such as improving their relation with their wives and children, which can boost their confidence and become more satisfied (Jackson, 2015). Initially, this may indicate a greater reluctance among men, as they tend to be less inclined to participate in unpaid work, such as childcare, compared to women (Varela & Moridi, 2024), who do such work 5 times more (Asao, Smirnov, & Xu, 2024). However, this kind of measures should be taken in consideration because welfare-only regulations have limited

effectiveness (Sobotka, Matysiak, & Brzozowska, 2020) and the work-life gap has not changed positively, let alone demographic issues.

Government regulations designed to mitigate workplace pressures and improve work conditions

With regard to the work culture, the stressors caused by high performance conditions and their consequences emphasize the significance of regulations, and the Japanese government has undertaken such measures. These include: introducing a stress screening program, conducted by firms with at least 50 employees, to examine the mental health of employees (Ogawa, Kishida, & Takeda, 2021). Limiting overtime to 45 hours per month and 360 hours per year, but with the caveat that under certain conditions this limit can be raised to 100 hours per month and 720 hours per year - for example, an agreement between the employer and the employee. Increasing the additional pay from 25% to 50% for overtime over 60 hours per month. Incentivize companies to contribute positively to workers' health by recognizing them as a "Certified Outstanding Organization" (Saito, 2024). However, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of these measures. In the case of the amendment on the limitation of overtime, those conditions for changing the limit, such as the agreement between employer and employee, can be relatively easily met by unethical methods such as blackmail or the threat of losing one's job, making it almost impossible for the worker to refuse. Also, by increasing overtime pay exclusively for employees who works over 60 hours of overtime per month is more likely to encourage the employee to work more than the legal limit in order to earn additional income. The demographic decline will also put more pressure on both bosses and workers to increase the working overtime to fill the gap of the missing working population (Lewis, 2024). Considering this, the measures are rather inefficient. They may even have an adverse impact, contributing to a worsening in the individual's well-being.

Government initiatives meant to combat the loneliness "hikikomori" phenomenon

Regarding loneliness and the "hikikomori" phenomenon, in 2021, a Ministry of Loneliness was created (an initiative also adopted by the UK in 2018), which aims to combat loneliness and social isolation, focusing on three main directions: social media use, identifying lonely and/or socially isolated people, and supporting collaboration between organizations, academic experts, government entities and other assistance organizations addressing the concerns of loneliness and social isolation (Office for Policy on Loneliness and Isolation, 2025). It is very important that these social problems receive more attention and that initiatives are sought to combat them as they have a huge impact at both an individual and societal level. According to Noreena Hertz (2021), loneliness and social isolation lead to more distrustful and less empathetic attitudes towards others, which can negatively affect social cohesion. In Japan in particular, this can be an obstacle to integrating foreigners into the country, given that Japan is open to a limited extent to immigrants.

Therefore, initiatives to combat loneliness and social isolation should be encouraged as they can have a significant positive effect given the huge consequences these phenomena have. At the same time, fewer individuals in such situations can be potential citizens who can form families, helping to alleviate the demographic crisis.

Immigration as a solution for the demographic crisis?!

From a migration perspective, migration is not a solution to demographic problems, nor even to social problems such as the "kodokushi" phenomenon. While in other countries immigrants help to alleviate these problems (for example, in Italy, there are many Romanians caring for Italian elderly), in Japan this is not as possible at the moment. First, because Japan welcomes relatively few foreigners into the country - compared to OECD countries, it has one of the smallest immigrant populations: 2.2% compared to 10.4% of the OECD (in 2021) (OECD, 2024). Then, because most foreigners are staying only temporarily in Japan, due to the conditions for receiving citizenship.

Japan applies the principle of *jus sanguinis*, whereby citizenship is granted according to the "right of blood" or according to the citizenship of the parents, regardless of place of birth (Green, 2017).

For other people who wish to obtain a permanent residence permit, they usually need to live in the country for a minimum of 10 years (OECD, 2024), and this can be difficult for several reasons. The first one is represented by the fact that the Japanese language proficiency is required as English is not a strong suit of the locals, according to the English Language Proficiency Index, in 2024, Japan ranked 92 out of 116 (Signum International AG, 2024). The second one explains that the Japanese society places great importance on social obligations, and people adopt politeness as a tool for interacting with others. Through it, the Japanese traditionally separate "real intentions" (*honne*) and "appearances" (*tatemae*) in communicating with others (Skirbekk, Matsukura, & Naohiro, 2014). Therefore, for a person from a country where it is normal to express one's true thoughts and feelings much more freely, it might be hard to understand this approach, and locals might consider them rude or view them in a more negative light if they behave in the same way as in their home country. The third reason deals with discrimination: according to a 2017 government survey on discrimination, nearly 40% of foreigners have been refused housing, 25% have been turned down by employers, and around 30% have experienced racist or discriminatory remarks (Burgess, 2024). As a result, people who decide to settle in Japan are in quite small numbers. In 2022, about 3 million foreigners were living in Japan, a significant percentage of whom were immigrants coming to work, interns and international students. Of these, only half were permanent residents (OECD, 2024).

The concept of a homogenous nation, which defines Japan's national identity, makes it very difficult for foreigners to genuinely integrate in the Japanese society. However, there are also supportive trends. For example, in Tokyo, a special manual has been created for foreign residents to understand Japanese manners and rules (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2024). Also, the government has implemented a point system to attract highly skilled foreigners. Through this, those recognized as "highly skilled foreigners" gain several privileges, such as facilitating the process for obtaining permanent residency and the chance of obtaining it after only 5 years of living in the country (Ministry of Justice in Japan, 2012). This is important because the welfare of a state and the opportunities offered by migration increase the faster the integration of immigrants is (Polgár, 2019). Thus, initiatives to facilitate the integration of foreigners in Japan can have a major positive effect. However, the demographic and social challenges were not adequately addressed by the number of immigrants. According to 2001 UN estimates, Japan required an average influx of 343 000 net immigrants per year from 2000 to 2050 in order to maintain the population size in 2050 equal to that of 2000. Respectively, an annual influx of 650 000 immigrants in the same time frame, for the working age population in 2050 to be equal to that of 2000 (Tsuya, 2014). If in Europe, immigrants contribute massively to the labour market (Micle, et al., 2022), this is almost impossible to achieve in Japan. Firstly, because of the "us vs. them" mentality whereby foreigners are tolerated but not truly integrated into society. Secondly, due to the exhausting conditions in the workplace. Thus, initiatives such as the acceptance of dual citizenship, alternative ways to obtain citizenship, or the promotion of a multicultural system, at least with other East Asians, could make Japan a more tolerant and welcoming country for foreigners (Castillo, 2020).

Finally, the main obstacle in solving demographic problems is the traditional mindset. Although the number of people with this outlook is decreasing, this mentality is still held by many older voters and politicians with a conservative outlook. It is also important not to forget that today's Japan's national identity was formed during the Meiji period, when the goal was to create national unity in the context of a divided population and the fear of being colonized by an outside power (Hollifield & Sharpe, 2017). That is why, even though the world is changing, a good part of the population and the leading members of Japan still see the strenuous work culture and the gender division in household chores and labour as normal, and immigrants as those people who are preferably not to remain in the country for extended periods unless they possess advanced skills and

can significantly enhance the nation's economy and reputation (Yamashige, 2014). If this trend continues, there is a good chance that the only major demographic policies the government will take in the coming years will continue to be limited to financial assistance and limited openness to foreign nationals.

CONCLUSIONS

There are also positive aspects to a smaller population, such as reduced environmental damage (Götmark, Cafaro, & O'Sullivan, 2018). But even so, the shrinking population will have a major impact on the social and economic systems because it also means a shrinking workforce. This, and the ageing population will make it more difficult to sustain the per capita income level and the system of social and health spending (OECD, 2024). While in 2020, social spending was about 136 trillion yen (€ 863 million) (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022), this, together with health spendings, is expected to increase to 17 trillion yen (€ 107.1 billion) between 2025 – 2040 (OECD, 2024).

The elderly dependency ratio also contributes to the current situation, which is also expected to increase: from 48% in 2020 (2.1 working persons per elderly) to 74.2% in 2070 (1.3 working persons per elderly) (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2023). Some European countries, including Greece, Italy, and Portugal, also face the same problem, as their dependency ratio exceeds 54%. This creates a significant vulnerability in the social and health care systems, necessitating the implementation of imperative reforms (Brie, 2019). Therefore, in order to avert numerous forms of decline, Japan and its leadership must concentrate on the underlying causes of the issue, including gender inequality, a rigid and inflexible work environment, low wages for young people, and restricted access of foreigners.

In conclusion, the causes of Japan's demographic crisis are deeply rooted in Japanese mentality and culture. They take the form of a traditional, homogenous society and, as evidenced in the research of the Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, the form of gender inequality (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, 2024). Thus, foreigners avoid possible living in Japan, the Japanese government only acts on surface issues, and in the context of a world dominated by the values of neoliberal capitalism, young people choose careers and a solitary lifestyle over family life, which causes a decline in marriages and newborns. Consequently, as demonstrated by studies conducted by the National Institute for Population and Social Security Research (2023), fertility rates are declining, while the number of elderly is increasing, thereby exacerbating the ongoing demographic crisis.

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