

The Feared Acceleration of Decline in Japan's Birthrate Due to COVID-19

Last year, the number of births in Japan reached a record low of approximately 810,000. The decline in Japan's birthrate was a serious matter even before the advent of COVID-19. What impact will the pandemic have on this situation?

About This Issue

The Feared Acceleration of Decline in Japan's Birthrate Due to COVID-19 - Committing to Policies That Focus on the Young

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Against the background of more than two years of a global pandemic, the number of births in Japan in 2021 was approximately 810,000, the lowest figure ever recorded. The decline in Japan's birthrate was a serious situation even before the advent of COVID-19, and the adoption of a wide variety of measures has not proven successful in boosting it. Will the pandemic affect the ongoing decline in Japan's birthrate? How should we approach the problem of this decline? The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in widespread changes in the economy and social life. In this issue of *My Vision*, we asked experts their thoughts regarding how we should think about the issue of Japan's declining birthrate in light of the pandemic based on a variety of factors.

Keywords...Declining number of births, trend of declining birthrate, youth-focused policies

Expert Opinions

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COVID-19 May Exacerbate Japan's Low Fertility

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Distinguished Professor, Keio University / Senior Researcher, Keio University Global Research Institute

Keywords...Delayed childbearing, refraining from having children, female population in their 20s and 30s

Now is the Time to Broadcast a Message That Emphasizes the Young

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Specially Appointed Professor, Center for Infectious Disease Education and Research

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Special Advisor to the Cabinet in charge of Social Security and Population Policy

Keywords...An "aged nation", Myrdal's prophylactic social policy, universal child and family policy

Comprehensive Investment in People Rather Than an Exclusive Focus on the Number of Births

Sawako Shirahase

Professor, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, The University of Tokyo

Keywords...Opportunities to interact with people, investment in human capital focusing on women, a society that makes full use of the strengths of young people

Interview period : March - April, 2022

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- Committing to Policies That Focus on the Young



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The number of babies born in Japan in 2021 is estimated to have been approximately 810,000. The nation's total fertility rate dropped to 1.3. The number of births exceeded 1 million in 2015 and has been declining rapidly since then. In fact, therefore, the number of births in the nation had been steadily shrinking even before the outbreak of COVID-19. Naturally, the government has adopted a variety of policies in response in recent years. The Abe administration set a policy goal of realizing a desired birthrate of 1.8, and proactively constructed nursery schools under a plan to accelerate the elimination of waiting-lists for children's admission; the administration also realized free early childhood education and childcare. The subsequent Suga administration moved to realize insurance coverage for infertility treatment; in 2021, a new law to promote the taking of childcare leave

by men passed the Diet, and a variety of other efforts were made. However, unfortunately, the trend of the declining birthrate cannot be changed, and it has been pointed out that it may be further accelerated by the effect of the spread of COVID-19 since 2020.

The Declining Birthrate Will Have a Severe Impact on the Economy and Social Security

Japan's declining birthrate will have an extremely severe impact on the future of Japanese society. As a result of the decline in the birthrate, not only will the domestic market shrink, but the number of workers will also decrease, which will affect the survival of the economy itself. In particular, it is predicted that the decrease in growth potential with the decline in the working-age population over the next decade or so will not be compensated for by the realization of increased productivity (for example through digitalization) alone. Because the demographic trend is visible over a long period of time, even at present, companies have no choice but to adopt a cautious attitude to capital investment in consideration of the shrinking domestic market. Consumers are also anxious about the sustainability of social security, making it difficult for them to actively spend. It will be necessary for the government to give earnest consideration to approaches that will enable the desired birthrate of 1.8 to be achieved. For this issue of My Vision, we therefore asked five experts in the area their opinions regarding the possible effects of the spread of COVID-19 on the declining birthrate, how this should be approached, and policies for changing the trend of the declining birthrate.

What Are Our Interviewees Thoughts Regarding the Effects of COVID-19?

First, regarding the impact of the pandemic on the declining birthrate, Noriko Tsuya, a Professor at Keio University, indicates that due to uncertainties about the future as a result of COVID-19, couples may delay starting families or having more children. It is a concern that this refraining from having children might lead to a further decline in the birthrate. In particular, the problem in Japan is that the female population in their 20s and 30s has been declining since before the pandemic, and in addition to this, the tendency towards delayed childbearing is progressing. Professor Tsuya is sounding a warning bell here, telling us that the postponement of having children due to COVID-19 may spur further population decline. She points out that the progression in the declining birthrate associated with COVID-19 may have a significant impact in the long run. Further, Fumio Ohtake (a Specially Appointed Professor at Osaka University), who participated in the government's Subcommittee on Novel Coronavirus Disease Control and analyzed and proposed COVID-19 responses from the perspective of behavioral economics, expresses concern regarding the impact of the government's COVID-19 measures on the declining birthrate. In particular, while the evidence has shown that the risk of infection with the Omicron variant becoming

serious is limited to the elderly and those with underlying conditions, in Japan, unlike countries such as the United Kingdom, restrictions on activities were uniformly strengthened, irrespective of age. Professor Ohtake fears that because it did not ease its restrictions on the activities of young people and children, young people may have received the impression that Japanese society does not take them seriously. Professor Ohtake believes that the government should send a message that emphasizes children and young people, and make a strong commitment to rethinking all its policies based on that guideline. Looking back on the series of measures that were put in place in response to COVID-19, this is a convincing point.

What Measures Are Currently Required to Respond to the Declining Birthrate?

Shintaro Yamaguchi, a Professor at the University of Tokyo who is engaged in a variety of empirical analyses that seek to find a direction for concrete measures to respond to the declining birthrate, emphasizes the necessity of working from the perspective of closing the gender gap and, above all, of rethinking the division of roles between men and women that is deeply-rooted in Japanese society. According to Professor Yamaguchi's analysis, when the number of men working from home increases, the time that they spend on childcare and housework increases. It will therefore be essential to promote work style reforms. Telework was introduced to Japan semi-forcibly due to COVID-19, but it will be extremely important to take this opportunity to realize and entrench flexible work styles throughout society as a whole. Professor Yamaguchi also points out that it will be essential to increase childcare allowances and improve nursery schools. Financial resources will be necessary for this. In this regard, Shiro Yamasaki, who oversees social security as a Special Advisor to the Cabinet, points out that all citizens, including the elderly, should consider the provision of social support that provides financial resources for children. Mr. Yamasaki indicates that preventive countermeasures are urgently required in order to prevent society from becoming destabilized as young people become paralyzed by inertia or experience psychological pressures due to population decline. In addition to this, it will also be important to establish a "universal child and family policy" that provides support for children throughout Japanese society. Mr. Yamasaki urges in particular the necessity of realizing policies of this type in order to provide coverage to non-regular employees who are falling outside the current support measures. Discussions regarding financial resources will be essential to full-scale measures in response to the declining birthrate, but this provides us with a valuable perspective to consider.

Creating a Society in Which Young People And Women Can Manifest Their Abilities

As we see, this issue has presented a number of views concerning the necessity of recognizing, at all levels, that further decline in the nation's birthrate would represent a danger to the survival of Japanese society. Studying the issue from the perspective of sociology, Sawako Shirahase, a Professor at The University of Tokyo, believes that there is no decisive factor in measures to respond to Japan's declining birthrate, and that rather than seeking an immediate solution in an increased number of births, our highest-priority policy should be to invest in young people, whose number is declining in Japan. She explains the necessity for conducting investment in young people and women, who are afraid of unemployment and job uncertainty, establishing an environment in which they are able to display their abilities, and creating new and efficient models for the utilization of human resources. At the same time, it will be necessary to provide systemic support that enables both men and women to balance these activities with child-raising. Measures to counter Japan's declining birthrate will require more than just policies that focus on the number of births. Professor Shirahase suggests that there will be a sustainable recovery in the number of births only after Japanese society is transformed into one in which young people and women, who have previously not been able to demonstrate their innate abilities, are able to flourish.

Dr. Okina is an Executive Vice President of the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) and the Chairperson of The Japan Research Institute, Limited. She holds a Ph.D. in Economics from Kyoto University. Dr. Okina serves in numerous public positions, including as a member of the Industrial Structure Council of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Social Security Council of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

COVID-19 May Exacerbate Japan's Low Fertility



Noriko Tsuya

Distinguished Professor, Keio University / Senior Researcher, Keio University Global Research Institute

The fertility impacts of COVID-19 can be divided into short-term and long-term ones. The short-term effect is a temporary postponement of childbearing due to the coronavirus crisis, while the long-term effect is a complete stop of childbirth because of the pandemic. However, the distinction between these two kinds of effects is largely conceptual. In reality it is rather difficult to separate the two, as a temporary postponement often leads to ultimate abandonment of an attempt to have children. Moreover, as coronavirus infections have not yet been successfully contained, it is extremely difficult to measure the COVID-19's effects on fertility at this point.

In any case, the pandemic often results in the loss of employment and reduction in person-to-person contact, which in turn will likely cause economic and psychological difficulties. And these hardships may lead to hesitation to have children, further depressing fertility, which has been very low in recent years. Women's fecundity (biological ability to have children) tends to be highest in their 20s to their early 30s, and the rate of childbearing declines significantly after age 35. For many years after World War II, the peak childbearing ages among Japanese women were their late 20s. Since the 2000s, however, the peak ages have shifted to women's early 30s, and the tendency towards delayed childbearing has become increasingly pronounced. If COVID-19 causes further postponement of childbirth, Japan's fertility will likely become even lower. If this happens, rapid shrinkage of the country's population will accelerate further.

According to an international survey on attitudes regarding a low-fertility society conducted by the Cabinet Office from October 2020 to January 2021, which sampled men and women aged 20 to 49 in Japan, Germany, France and Sweden, the lowest percentage of respondents answering that they expected their living standards to improve was found in Japan (in particular among the younger respondents). Further, when the Japanese respondents with no children or only one child were asked about attitudinal changes associated with the pandemic, their desire for children was found to be in general weakened by the pandemic. Though it is not possible at this point in time to ascertain whether this is a temporary phenomenon, COVID-19-related anxieties regarding prospects for household finances and family life that many Japanese men and women are likely to be feeling should not be overlooked.

Japan's female population at the peak marriage and childbearing ages of 20–39 has been on a long-term downward trend since the 1980s. Thus, even if there were no COVID-19, the number of births in the country would certainly continue to decline. Nevertheless, to prevent further declines in the rate of fertility due to the pandemic, effective policy and societal efforts are urgently needed to alleviate the anxiety that many Japanese men and women are likely to be feeling about their future life prospects. While the recent policy change that allows infertility treatments to be covered by the national health insurance is appropriate and helpful given the increasing delay in childbearing, it is also important and necessary to provide comprehensive policy support to help women and couples who want to have children balance work and family life, and to make workplaces and the labor market more family friendly in consideration of working parents.

Professor Tsuya's research focuses on demographic and family changes in Japan and Asia in long-term perspective. Her lead-authored book, *Prudence and Pressure: Reproduction and Human Agency in Europe and Asia, 1700-1900* (MIT Press, 2010), which was based on empirical analyses of a large amount of historical demographic and economic data in collaboration with groups of international scholars, received the Population Association of Japan Award in 2013, and the Keio University Award in 2014. She holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago with a specialization in demography. She was formerly a research fellow of the Population Institute at the East-West Center in the U.S. She became professor, Faculty of Economics at Keio University in 1998. From 2019 to 2020, she was the director of the Institute for Economic Studies, Keio University. She was also a member of the Science Council of Japan in 2005–2014, and the president of the Population Association of Japan in 2018–2020.

Expert Opinions

Now is the Time to Broadcast a Message That Emphasizes the Young



Fumio Ohtake

Specially Appointed Professor,
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The pandemic has greatly reduced opportunities for people to come into contact with each other, and social customs and norms have changed significantly. The decline in Japan's birthrate could be further exacerbated as a result. In the two years of the pandemic, the number of marriages has decreased by approximately 10% against the expected number based on past trends. This can be thought of as “postponement of marriage,” but there is an upper limit to the age at which women can give birth, and delays in marriage could lead to a decrease in the number of births. For everyone, there is an age range in which we have the greatest potential to meet a partner, and it will be no easy thing for young people to regain the chance for such encounters that they have lost as a result of the restrictions on their activities. People for whom online dating is an acceptable choice will be in a better position than people who are more used to face-to-face encounters. These latter people will not find it easy to

replicate that experience online.

In order to change this situation, one that has the potential to accelerate the decline in Japan's birthrate, we should take advantage of the social and lifestyle changes brought about by the COVID-19 crisis. For example, the increase in teleworking from home and the consequent expansion of child-rearing experience among men has changed awareness of the gendered division of roles within the family. It is certain that it has become easier to balance work and family than it was pre-COVID-19. In addition, the entrenchment of telework has reduced the necessity for commuting and promoted migration to areas offering environments suitable for raising children. This is likely to contribute to the improvement of the birthrate. It will therefore be important to form social norms to ensure that such trends are able to take root.

At the same time, the pandemic has revealed that Japanese society is oriented towards the elderly. The risk of serious illness arising from the Omicron variant that characterized the 6th wave of the pandemic was lower than that from the variants encountered previously, and the risk was most prevalent among the elderly and people with underlying conditions. However, restrictions on people's activities were uniformly tightened, irrespective of age. Japan's restrictions on the activities of children and adults, imposed in order to protect the health of the elderly, were put in place hastily and without sufficient consideration. Britain initially took strict measures, but later questioned the negative impact that these were having on the lives of children and young people, and now emphasizes the importance of restoring the nation's society to its pre-COVID state. I think that young people took this difference as a sign that Japanese politics disregards the importance of the lives of young people. It is necessary to transform Japanese society into a youth-oriented society.

The Japanese government should make a strong commitment to sending out the message that children and young people are important to society, and to reconsider all policy under that guideline. Appealing to young people through this direction of policy development and a message such as this could lead to the creation of a society in which young people recognize that they are able to have children and raise them with complete peace of mind.

Professor Ohtake specializes in labor economics and behavioral economics. He is a member of the Advisory Council on Countermeasures against Novel Influenza and Other Diseases, and conducts empirical research on methods of promoting behavioral changes in the context of countermeasures against COVID-19 from the perspective of behavioral economics. He holds a PhD in economics from Osaka University. Following terms including as a professor in Osaka University's Institute of Social and Economic Research, he has been a professor in the university's Graduate School of Economics since 2018. He took his current position in 2021. He has served as the Executive Vice President of Osaka University, as President of the Japanese Economic Association, and as a government delegate. He won the Japan Academy Prize and the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities for *Nihon no fubyoudou – kakusa shakai no gensou to mirai* (“Inequality in Japan”) (Nikkei Publishing, 2005).

Editor: Reiko Kanda, Maiko Sakaki and Tatsuya Yamaji. This is a translation of a paper originally published in Japanese. NIRA bears full responsibility for the translation presented here. Translated by Michael Faul.

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Expert Opinions

Eliminate the Gender Gap Through Reform of Work Styles



Shintaro Yamaguchi

Professor, Faculty of Economics,
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The decline in the number of births in Japan recorded in 2021 may be due to couples delaying the timing of childbirth as a result of increased anxiety over the idea of raising children against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. If it is indeed simply a matter of timing, when the pandemic declines in virulence, we will see a swing in the opposite direction and the number of births will return to its trend prior to the pandemic. However, it is possible that this may not be the only problem. It is only natural that Japan's worsening economic situation makes it undesirable to assume the responsibility of a family and children. If economic uncertainty continues to increase into the future, there will be little increase in the number of marriages, and this may have a negative impact on the nation's birthrate over the long term. It remains difficult to predict the long-term effects of the pandemic.

We can say that the pandemic has generated progress in the use of telework, and this represents a step towards closing the gender gap. Nevertheless, this is still a deep-rooted problem, and one which cannot be solved by changing a single factor. In order to further promote men's participation in housework and childcare, it will be necessary to work on various areas of Japanese society (for example companies and sites of education) simultaneously, in order to overturn stereotypical thinking regarding gender.

The concept of working from home, which has been introduced to Japan at a stroke due to the pandemic, may be an opportunity to correct the gender gap in relation to the burden of housework and childcare at home. Promoting men's participation in housework and childcare was an important policy issue even before the pandemic, but little progress has been realized. Japan's system of childcare leave for men is, formally speaking, one of the best in the world; in reality, however, this childcare leave is not being taken. Research conducted by my team found that increasing telecommuting by one day a week increased the time men spent on housework and childcare by 6.2% and the time spent with their families by 5.6%. As this indicates, if we take the opportunity provided by the pandemic to change the way we work across Japanese society as a whole, it could potentially have a positive impact on the nation's birthrate over the long term.

Getting married and having children must be an individual's free choice. However, the rapid decline in Japan's birthrate and the aging of its population will profoundly increase the burden on the working generations. Currently, the burden represented by the cost of raising children is enormous, and this cost is not balanced with the benefit of doing so. The adoption of measures to respond to the declining birthrate is essential. Research has shown that childcare support measures such as increasing the number of childcare centers and the provision of childcare allowances have the effect of increasing the birthrate. We must commence by responding to the problems that parents face immediately following the birth of a child, such as the issue of waiting lists for access to childcare facilities. The proportion of Japan's spending on support for children and child-raising is two-thirds of the OECD average, and only half that of the top-spending nations of Europe. There is certainly still room for improvement by policy means.

Professor Yamaguchi specializes in the economics of the family and labor economics. Taking women's active participation in the labor market as his starting point, he conducts research that adopts an empirical approach to the challenges of marriage, childbirth and childcare. Professor Yamaguchi holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has held his current position since 2019, following terms as assistant professor and associate professor at McMaster University and associate professor in the Graduate School of Economics of the University of Tokyo. He was a co-winner of the 41st Suntory Prize in the category of Political Science and Economics for "Kazoku no shiawase" no keizaigaku – Deeta bunseki de wakatta kekkon, shussan, kosodate no shinjitsu ("Economics of Family Wellbeing") (In Japanese; published by Kobunsha Shinsho, 2019). He is also a member of the Cabinet Office's Council for Gender Equality and a member of the editorial board of the Asahi Shimbun.

Expert Opinions

Childcare Support Should Be a Concern of Society as a Whole as Part of Child / Family Policy, Not Simply an Employment-Related Policy



Shiro Yamasaki

Special Advisor to the Cabinet
in charge of Social Security and
Population Policy

A feeling of resignation that the declining birthrate can no longer be stopped seems to be becoming more widespread in Japanese society. For a 10-year period from 2005, the nation's fertility rate temporarily rose. However, this was a temporary phenomenon caused by a spike in childbirth that produced what is termed in Japan the "second-generation baby boomers" (born, roughly speaking, between 1971 and 1974). The trend of births among subsequent generations is at the lowest level ever recorded, and the pandemic has only further pushed the level down. Clearly, we are not in a position in which it will be possible to reverse the trend of population decline. At the very least, however, the current precipitous decline must be mitigated. The key will be the "prophylactic social policy" discussed by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal (Note). This way of thinking urges us to adopt preventive policies before society faces a crisis due to population decline.

If this situation is left unchecked, Japan will have a population of less than 50 million 100 years from now. This will be entirely different to the situation 100 years ago, when the nation also had a population of 50 million. At that time, despite its small population, Japan was a young country, and its rate of aging was 5%. By contrast, Japan in the future will be an "aged nation," in which the elderly make up 40% of the population. There is a strong risk that the domestic market will shrink, investment will decrease, and innovation will stagnate. There is also the possibility of the intensification of intergenerational conflict as young people feel increasingly hopeless against the background of a decline in productivity and motivation to work. It is essential that we take preventive measures before we experience socioeconomic and political instability due to a declining population.

The reason that we have been unable to stop the decline in Japan's birthrate up to the present is because we have put off dealing with the issue, and have failed to tackle it head-on. Because our current child-rearing policies are a jumbled miscellany rather than a unified system, many young people are failing to benefit from support measures. Childcare support for non-regular employees is one example. Childcare leave benefits, funded by employment insurance, commenced in 1995, when there were not large numbers of non-regular employees. Since then, the working environment has changed significantly, and now more than half of female employees are non-regular employees. As a result, there are many cases in which childcare leave benefits under the employment insurance system are not available. There is a limit to what can be achieved with employment policies alone. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic also, the economic risks became apparent among non-regularly employed young people and the parenting generation.

What is important now is a "universal child and family policy" that supports children throughout society. We should provide seamless childcare support for all children. No matter what the employment situation of the parents, there should be no difference in the environment in which the child grows up. It will be desirable for all generations to bear the burden, because the purpose is to stabilize society as a whole. There is honestly little time left. Now is our last chance.

(Note) Gunnar Myrdal and his wife Alva were deeply involved in the process of formation of Sweden's welfare state in the 1930s. Opinions expressed in the text are the personal opinions of the author.

Mr. Yamasaki joined the Ministry of Health and Welfare (now the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) in 1978. He has served in positions including Director in General for Policies on Cohesive Society of the Cabinet Office, Executive Secretary to the Prime Minister, Director in General of the Social Welfare and War Victims' Relief Bureau of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and Commissioner of the Cabinet Secretariat's Headquarter for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan. During this time, he was involved in the planning and putting into effect of policy related to long-term care insurance, even becoming known as "Mr. Long-term Care Insurance". Following his retirement, he served as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Lithuania. He then published *Jinkou senryaku houan* ("The Population Strategy Bill") (Nikkei Publishing, 2021), which proposed solutions to the problem of population decline. Drawing on his abundant experience in the field of policy, in this book, which takes the form of a novel, Mr. Yamasaki depicts the inner workings of the government as it strives to establish proposals for reform, while showing the harsh reality of the population problem. Mr. Yamasaki has held his current position since January 2022.

Expert Opinions

Comprehensive Investment in People Rather Than an Exclusive Focus on the Number of Births



Sawako Shirahase

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It is considered that the longer a man and a woman spend time together, the more positive the effect on their fertility rate will be; when working hours were limited to 48 hours a week some years ago in the UK, the total fertility rate temporarily increased. However, in the midst of the pandemic, while people are spending more time with family members as a result for example of restrictions on going out, the birthrate has declined even in the United States. Psychological anxiety generated by the increase in unemployment and employment insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on birthrates, including in Japan. While a clear direct causal relationship among the macro-level economic situation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and individual behaviors/decision-making cannot be determined, it appears that the current unfavorable situation, one which is closely associated with COVID-19, may, to some extent, be a shared factor associated with declining birthrates across nations.

The fact that people have been deprived of situations in which they are able to physically interact with each other due to the COVID-19 pandemic has created a variety of problems. For instance, young people have tended to delay or shy away from marriage or having babies, looking at the future with a good deal of uncertainty. There are college students who have completed their higher education without in-person classes or discussions with classmates and professors. Working together can represent a good opportunity to meet new colleagues and friends, but the current pandemic has deprived students of these chances. Such a loss of opportunities to expand new networks may cause serious problems for these students in the future. We have found that due to this insecure and anxious situation, the number of babies being born, including premarital births, continues to decline.

Therefore, what I would like to recommend for coping with these global risks is investment in people, rather than seeking an “increased number of births” as an immediate result. We should allow young people to face challenges and take risks rather than nipping this in the bud. It will be important to create a social environment that allows challenges to be welcomed and the various potential risks that such challenges entail to be shared together; this will make it possible for small buds to grow into large trees. We should help younger and future generations to take up the challenge of innovative ideas and take all manner of risks, nurturing the potential strengths of younger generations, who are declining in number at this point. To that end, it will be very important to guarantee a variety of opportunities and options that are available regardless of gender, age, nationality, or disability. Society should be inclusive, guaranteeing equality in opportunities and the human rights that will enable such opportunities to be enjoyed regardless of family background, gender, or age.

We can see an inverse relationship between the increase in higher education among women and the number of women who are engaged in professional and managerial jobs and fertility rates, but this is closely related to the fact that women have not been guaranteed access to equal opportunities to their male counterparts in a variety of ways in the labor market, and that conventional gender norms and relations have been embedded firmly in fundamental social systems, including the family. Thus, the policy to be introduced with the highest priority is to apply external pressure for the amendment, within a short period of time, of the significant gender gap in occupations, wages, and promotions, and at the same time, encouragement of men to spend more time in household chores and childrearing, similar to their female counterparts. More importantly, we should emphasize the social responsibility for childrearing and make it more explicit, to ensure that every child can be guaranteed a decent life irrespective of family type, including single-parent families. There should be systemic support for the realization of a balance between work and family for all, rather than this being a type of “blessing” that is occasionally granted by someone in a relatively superior position who possesses an understanding of work-life balance. In the case of childrearing, it will be desirable to incorporate not only the women who give birth, but also the men who raise children together with them, into such a system.

Human investment requires time until we determine the results that offer clear impacts, and it involves the risk that such investment will not always result in the consequences that were hoped for from the beginning. It will be necessary to create a social agreement concerning readiness to take risks in investing in people of all genders without seeking immediate profit. Understanding risks over the medium- to long-term will determine the pros and cons of building a human resources development model that is efficient and possesses significant potential as a result. This is the key point that will influence the future of Japan.

Professor Shirahase has led numerous large-scale research projects about Japan’s declining birthrate and aging population, and social inequality and disparity, as the main themes. She has made comprehensive policy proposals to assist Japan’s measures in response to its declining birthrate and aging population, seeking to achieve sustainable growth for Japanese society as a whole. Professor Shirahase holds a DPhil in sociology from Oxford University. She took her current position in 2010, following a term as an assistant professor at The University of Tokyo. From 2019 to 2021, she served as The University of Tokyo’s Executive Vice President for International Affairs (overseeing international affairs, the president’s vision, and public relations). Currently, she is also the Director of the Tokyo Center for Contemporary Japanese Studies, and the Senior Vice-Rector of the United Nations University (giving her the status of Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations).

Editor: Reiko Kanda, Maiko Sakaki and Tatsuya Yamaji. This is a translation of a paper originally published in Japanese. NIRA bears full responsibility for the translation presented here. Translated by Michael Faul.

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