

Background to the declining birthrate and characteristics of unmarried people in Japan **Asuka KURIMURA (Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University)**

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Dr. Kurimura started off her presentation by explaining the background to the declining birthrate. The current trends in Japan's total fertility rate, Japan's unmarried rate and the changing attitudes of Japan's population are mentioned in this regard.

Japan's total fertility rate has been on a declining trend since the late 1970s, reaching a new record low of 1.20 in 2023. Dr. Kurimura identifies the increasing number of unmarried individuals as the primary cause of this decline. There is a direct correlation between the declining birthrate and the growing unmarried population, as out-of-wedlock births are rare in Japan. Additionally, the sharp rise in the number of never-married singles, particularly at older ages, is also highlighted as a contributing factor.

The high unmarried rate in Japan is primarily attributed to the economic and employment situation of unmarried individuals, as well as the challenges of finding a suitable partner. Dr. Kurimura identifies the rising economic instability among the population as a key factor. Data shows that regular employees are significantly more likely to get married. Moreover, the process of finding a partner has evolved over time, which is also a crucial factor. Dr. Kurimura notes that the perception of marriage has shifted from a 'team sport' to an 'individual sport' (*Ushikubo 2022*). This shift in mindset is reflected in trends like 'marriage hunting activities' and the rise of online marriages. Additionally, the decline of arranged marriages, workplace-related marriages, and community support in partner-finding are highlighted. As a countermeasure, the government has introduced initiatives such as AI-based matching systems.

On this point Dr. Kurimura derives, that the collected data shows a higher acceptance of singlehood and a general decrease in the intention of entering a relationship with the opposite sex. To achieve a deeper understanding of this data, certain characteristics of unmarried people in Japan are put into perspective.

In discussing the background of the study on singlehood and unmarried individuals, Dr. Kurimura highlights a trend in Japanese media that often portrays middle-aged singles as happy and successful. However, this portrayal is partially contradicted by data, which shows that many middle-aged singles in their 40s and 50s live with their parents, hold non-regular employment, and have social circles limited to close relatives. Additionally, interest in romantic relationships among this demographic is reported to be quite low, although insufficient research exists to draw definitive conclusions.

Dr. Kurimura outlines the methodology used in her study, 'Reflection Survey on Family History' (2022). The study was based on a survey mailed to citizens aged 35-49 across Japan, achieving a response rate of 43.7% with 3,332 valid responses collected. The target group consisted of never-married Japanese men and women within this age range. Participants were asked about their views on marriage and child-rearing, and various aspects of their

socioeconomic status were examined. Based on the findings, measures were suggested according to the individual profiles of the participants

The study results divided participants into four distinct groups. The first group, named the 'Happily Single' type, comprises the largest portion of respondents at 46%. Individuals in this group hold non-traditional views on marriage and have a positive outlook on singlehood and child-rearing. They are characterized by the highest levels of education, income, happiness, and economic independence among the groups. This group includes slightly more women than men.

The second group was named "Child-Rearing Negative" type and contains the second most respondents with 27%. Their views of marriage and singlehood are comparable to group 1 but differ regarding their views toward child-rearing. Persons of group 2 have the second lowest socioeconomic status in aspect of this study. This group also contains slightly more women than men.

The third group, named the 'Marriage Seeking' type, holds conventional and positive views on marriage and child-rearing, but expresses a negative attitude towards singlehood. Members of this group have the second-highest levels of education, income, and happiness. This group consists of more men than women and is more likely to include individuals living in rural areas.

The fourth and last group was named "Economically Discouraged" type. Towards singlehood and marriage, they show similar views to group 3, regarding child-rearing they show mixed attitudes. This group also contains more men than women and show the lowest socioeconomic status. Their opinion on child-rearing is associated with negative economic characteristics. The participants of groups 3 and 4 make up 14% and 13% of all respondents.

Dr. Kurimura presents the results of her study using graphics and provides conclusions based on the collected data. For Group 1, the 'Happily Single' type, she suggests the potential need for a flexible support system, as there are promising opportunities to increase their likelihood of marriage. Regarding Group 2, she highlights the necessity for a partnership system that supports out-of-wedlock child-rearing. For Groups 3 and 4, she recommends implementing support systems to help individuals find suitable partners, alongside expanding stable employment opportunities and improving conditions for non-regular workers.

In conclusion Dr. Kurimura states that this topic should be further and more deeply researched, mentioning the need for alternatives to marriage as a point. Additionally, current policies should consider people with a negative attitude towards marriage more in future measures. Finally, the review and improvement of the current social system gets addressed, since its foundation is based on the existence of stable companies and families.