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Social and Economic Factors Influencing Japanese Women's Decision about Childbearing in Post-Bubble Japan

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING JAPANESE WOMEN'S
DECISION ABOUT CHILDBEARING IN POST-BUBBLE JAPAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ASIAN STUDIES

by

Rebecca Richko

2016

To: Dean John Stack
Green School of International and Public Affairs

This thesis, written by Rebecca Richko, and entitled Social and Economic Factors Influencing Japanese Women's Decision about Childbearing in Post-Bubble Japan, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Amy Bliss Marshall

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Date of Defense: March 29, 2016

The thesis of Rebecca Richko is approved.

Dean John Stack
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and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

DEDICATION

To my family, friends, and the academic relationships I have made over the years. It is a culmination of those experiences that have helped me through this process.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING JAPANESE WOMEN'S
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Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Steven Heine, Major Professor

For the past twenty-five years, Japan's population decline has been a domestic and global concern. A common discourse on the issue of Japan's low birth rate tends to focus on the role of women, specifically indicating that women should change their behavior to prioritize motherhood. This thesis argues that Japan's low birth rate is the result of a nexus of social and economic influences that are experienced in contemporary society. In order to provide a nuanced analysis of the influences on a woman's childbearing decision, motivators of and challenges to population growth will be explored. The dynamic struggle that women experience from the internalized stress of deciding about childbearing while coping with external factors from the community, government, and corporate sector is divided into four categories. The conditions caused by the interaction of these different factors contributes to consistent decline in the birth rate.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Complexity of the Birth Rate Crisis in Japan

For the past twenty-five years, Japan's population decline has been a domestic and global concern. The national birth rate is steadily decreasing and Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare predicts that, without adequate intervention, the population will fall to 86.7 million by 2060, a loss of about 32% of its current 127 million population.¹ One of the main concerns of the low birth rate discussed by many economists is the lack of replenishment to the workforce population, defined as the population between twenty to sixty-four years old, in the near future.² The workforce is depended on to generate the revenue needed to fund government programs, such as social security. With a third of the population projected to be over sixty-five years old in 2050, there is a greater necessity for these programs.³ Many economists have found that the large public medical expenditure, combined with the lack of government revenue produced by the decreased workforce,

¹ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Department of Population Dynamics Research Japan, *Vital Statistics: Population Projections for Japan* (Japan Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2012).

² Robert Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population," in *Structural Impediments to Growth in Japan*, eds. Magnus Blomström, Jennifer Corbett, Fumio Hayashi, and Anil Kashyap (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 71-87; Toshihiro Ihori, Ryuta Ray Kato, Masumi Kawade, and Shun-ichiro Bessho, "Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan," in *Tackling Japan's Fiscal Challenges: Strategies to Cope with High Public Debt and Population Aging*, eds. Keimei Kaizuka and Anne O. Krueger (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan/International Monetary Fund, 2006), 30-68; and Thomas F. Cargill, and Takayuki Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population"; and Louis D. Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 205.

could potentially create a huge national debt in the coming decades.⁴ Therefore, Japan needs to stabilize the national birth rate in order to increase its future workforce population and avoid financial crisis. In an attempt to address this concern, some scholars focus on issues related to immigration. Because this thesis focuses on factors influencing Japanese women's childbearing decision, however, matters related to immigration fall outside the scope of research.

Discussion of Japan's low birth rate tends to focus on the role of women, specifically indicating that women should change their behavior to prioritize motherhood rather than a career or other goals.⁵ This stance is supported in large part by traditionalists who remain unsympathetic to, or lack concern for, the societal disincentives for women who are deciding whether or not to have children.⁶ Many Japanese women, in fact, do wish to become mothers but are met with obstacles that, when stacked together, are too great to overcome.⁷ Some of these obstacles, whether in a woman's professional or personal life, will be analyzed in the coming chapters.

⁴ Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population"; and Ihori, et al., "Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan."

⁵ Setsu Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Sharon Sievers, "Women in China, Japan, and Korea," in *Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History*, eds. Barbara Ramusack and Sharon Sievers (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁶ Susan Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Justin McCurry, "Japanese Minister Wants 'Birth-giving Machines', aka Women, to Have More Babies," *The Guardian*, January 28, 2007, accessed October 17, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/29/japan.justinmccurry>.

⁷ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Department of Population Dynamics Research Japan, *The Fourteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey in 2010*:

There is a noticeable struggle that women go through in Japan that is not amply discussed in scholarly research or popular commentary. The ideal for women to become mothers is supported by public discourse and is sought after by many women. When faced with the demands of contemporary society, however, a growing number of women find motherhood to be an unfeasible option, even though the desire for bearing children remains. The struggle between the ideal and the alternative situations that women face represents the pressure to live up to the ideal of becoming mothers without having the necessary conditions or tools to do so. While parts of this research focus on the struggle that women go through in their childbearing decision, the focus remains on the factors that influence their choice, rather than the associated psychology of decision-making.

This thesis argues that Japan's low birth rate is the result of a nexus of social and economic influences that are experienced in contemporary society. The population decline is not reducible to any single factor. It encompasses internal factors which stem from a person, family or community as well as external factors from the government and corporate sector that generates the stress of deciding whether or not to have children. The conditions caused by the interaction of these different factors contributes to consistent decline in the birth rate.

My analysis of the influences on a woman's decision about childbearing is based on two fundamental distinctions: (1) the ideal female gender model versus alternative gender roles; and (2) internal versus external influences. The ideal gender model encourages women to achieve motherhood at a young age, usually in their twenties, and

Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles (Japan Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2010), 18.

shortly after they are married.⁸ As young, married mothers, women are expected to stop working outside of the home and devote themselves to the household.⁹ It is beyond my scope of research to fully trace the origins of the ideal gender model, but this formula seems to have been established since the late 1800s.

Due to the idealized gender role and societal expectations for women, marriage and childbirth are almost synonymous in Japanese culture. The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research stated in a survey report from 2010:

Looking at the motives of couples who eventually decided to get married, pregnancy (“became pregnant”) was the most frequently chosen response among couples with wives younger than 25 years old, which accounted for 50.0%. For couples with wives 25 years or older, the proportion of respondents who chose “became pregnant” was lower, and more than half chose “felt it was the appropriate age to get married.”¹⁰

After twenty-five years old, the percentage of premarital pregnancies as a reason for marriage significantly decreases (from 50% to 12.4%).¹¹ Instead, marriages formed after a person is twenty-five years old are credited to the societal pressure for a woman to marry in her twenties, which is followed by the expectation to have children within a couple of

⁸ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*; Lynne Nakano, “Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan” in *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*, eds. Satsuki Kawano, Glenda Susan Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), 163-182; and Sievers, “Women in China, Japan, and Korea.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Department of Population Dynamics Research Japan, *The Fourteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey in 2010: Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples* (Japan Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2010b), 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

years of marriage.¹² The percentage of married women without children is small, reflecting the expectancy of children after marriage. However, the frequency of married women without children is gradually becoming more common. Women are getting married at older ages than before, leaving less years available to them to have children.¹³ Because of this, as Fumie Kumagai says, “Japanese married women who do not bear children comprise two contrasting groups: those who do not want to bear children, and those who are unable to do so.”¹⁴ Thus, delayed marriage is directly related to the birth rate and may be discussed in this thesis when deemed relevant.

In contrast, alternative gender roles reflect the adaptations made by Japanese women in order to overcome challenges in contemporary society. These roles are more inclusive of the variety of lifestyles that women participate in. Some of the conditions that produce these alternative gender roles include the high expectation of mothers to provide quality, hands-on childcare, the economic cost of having and raising children as well as interest in professional pursuits. Thus, alternative gender roles include the positions that women actually find themselves in, whether they are working towards becoming mothers may lack interest in motherhood. A multifaceted approach will be used to assess the

¹² Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*; Nakano, “Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan”; and Sievers, “Women in China, Japan, and Korea.”

¹³ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 4; and National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 2.

¹⁴ Fumie Kumagai, *Families in Japan: Changes, Continuities, and Regional Variations* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 15.

contrast between the ideal gender model and the contemporary social reality of alternative gender roles.

This paper is also framed by the binary relationship of internal and external factors affecting a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child. Internal factors deal with the issues that are internalized by women, the emotional struggle of the high exposure to the ideal gender model and the recognized implications of the alternative gender roles. These influences arise from the interior dialogue that women experience between their personal desires and the values impressed upon them from the external factors. External influences are governmental public and economic policies and corporate programs, which try to deal with the population decline. In order to provide a nuanced analysis of the influences on a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child, the following categories will be discussed: (a) internal, individual factors; (b) internal, public factors; (c) external, economic factors; and (d) external, institutional factors. Definitions of these categories will be explained further in later sections.

Global Perspectives of the Birth Rate

I will use birth rates whenever possible, instead of fertility rates. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, fertility rates and birth rates are different by definition. A country's fertility rate is "the average number of children a woman would bear if she survived through the end of the reproductive age span."¹⁵ A fertility rate above two children

¹⁵ Leontine Alkema, Adrian Raftery, Patrick Gerland, Samuel Clark, Francois Pelletier, et al. "Probabilistic Projections of the Total Fertility Rate for All Countries," *Demography* 48 (2011): 816.

per woman signifies population replenishment.¹⁶ A nation's birth rate, however, is "the average number of births during a year per 1,000 persons in the population."¹⁷ The birth rate is the actuality of birth, while the fertility rate denotes a nation's potential for population growth. Because this thesis frames the topic of Japan's low birth rate on a societal level and the fertility rate deliberately excludes male participation in birth, the fertility rate will not be used in the analysis. Therefore, the birth rate will be used instead, which is a gender neutral measurement of population growth. Even though the focus is on factors that influence a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child in Japan, I argue that the low birth rate is a systemic matter, and not the primary responsibility of women.

Japan is a country that exhibits both a low birth rate and long life expectancy, but is not alone in this status. In fact, Japan is one of many countries that contributes to global aging. According to John Traphagan and John Knight, researchers of Japan's aging society, "Modernization assumptions are especially evident in demographic transition theory, according to which societies are held to move from 'traditional' states of high fertility and high mortality to 'modern' states of low fertility and low mortality."¹⁸ For instance, in 2015, Somalia reported a birth rate of 40.45, Mali had a rate of 44.99, and Niger counted a

¹⁶ Leonard J. Schoppa, *Race for the Exits: The Unraveling of Japan's System of Social Protection* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 151.

¹⁷ "The World Factbook – Country Comparison: Total Fertility Rate," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed October 15, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2127rank.html>.

¹⁸ John W. Traphagan, and John Knight, *Demographic Change and the Family in Japan's Aging Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 6.

birth rate of 45.45 births per one thousand population, one of the highest in the world.¹⁹ For that same year, Japan's birth rate was only 7.93.

In contrast, developed nations, or "modern states", experience a low birth rate and low mortality. Most countries around the world share a similarity in that the birth rate exhibited a bump in the 1950s and 1960s known as the baby boom, before leveling out or declining in the 1970s and after. The United States follows the pattern of developed nations and, with the exception of the baby boom that occurred after World War II, has consistently maintained a birth rate between 12 and 16 births per one thousand population since the 1970s. As of 2015, the birth rate for the United States stood around 12.49.²⁰ The history of France's birth rate is very similar. Currently at 12.38, France's birth rate has not fallen below 12 births per one thousand but has not climbed above 16 since the 1970s.²¹ In a more extreme case, South Korea's birth rate is quite significant, dropping from 43.95 in 1960 to 16.1 just twenty-five years later.²² South Korea's birth rate is also quite low, standing at 8.19 as of 2015. It may come as a surprise to some, however, that Germany and Japan have competed for the world's lowest birth rate in recent years, with Germany at 8.47, compared

¹⁹ World DataBank, "World Development Indicators – Crude Birth Rate by Country," accessed October 15, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CBRT.IN/countries>; and Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook – Country Comparison: Birth Rate," accessed October 15, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2054rank.html>.

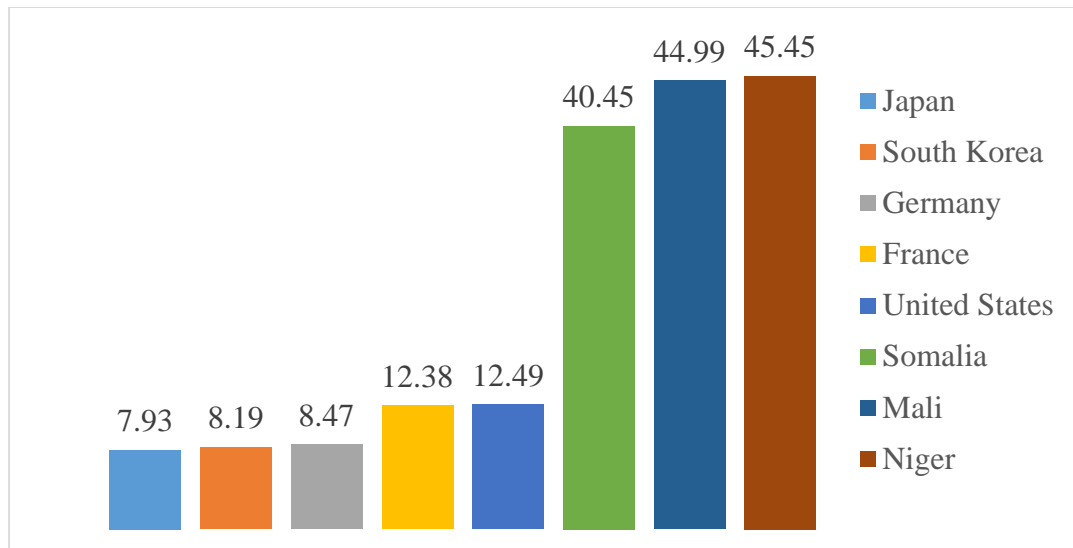
²⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook."

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

to Japan’s 7.93 of the same year.²³ The birth rates of these different countries is represented in Figure 1.1. Thus, Japan is not an isolated case as a developed country with a low birth rate. It is natural to anticipate a decline in Japan’s birth rate when comparing it to similar “modern” nations.

Figure 1.1. International Comparison of National Birth Rates²⁴



Japan’s Low Birth Rate and the Role of Women in Society

Despite this commonality shared amongst developed nations, Japan has consistently ranked towards the bottom of the lists of global birth rates.²⁵ After World War II, Japan’s birth rate also underwent a surge due to the baby boom. The trend continued

²³ “Germany passes Japan to have world’s lowest birth rate – study,” *BBC News*, May 29, 2015, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32929962>; and World DataBank, “World Development Indicators – Crude Birth Rate by Country.”

²⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook – Country Comparison: Birth Rate.”

²⁵ World DataBank, “World Development Indicators – Crude Birth Rate by Country”; and Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook – Country Comparison: Birth Rate.”

until 1973, when the birth rate was 19.4, and began to decline to its current rate of 7.93.²⁶ In 1990, when Japan's birth rate was 10 births per one thousand people, Japanese officials, academics, and media figures became intensely concerned about the low birth rate and began investigating the lives of women in relation to the population growth. Sumiko Iwao, a Harvard psychologist who performed extensive research on understanding Japanese women's attitudes and behaviors, commented on the sudden attention on, and often criticism of, women as the cause of the birth rate decline:

To women, the figure was no surprise; to men, it came as quite a shock. The reaction in the world of men, especially those in government, was actually rather comical; the lowest birth rate in Japan's history shook them for perhaps the first time into considering women's problems seriously.²⁷

The economic prosperity that Japan experienced in the postwar period was perhaps able to hide major social problems that existed during that time. It was not until the economy began to decline in the 1990s (when society began searching for the cause of the decline) that those matters quickly became topics of concern. Unfortunately, consideration for women's problems often became synonymous with blaming them for the population decline.

The year 1990 proved a critical point for the topic of Japan's birth rate, as there was a concentrated effort from multiple disciplines that began in search of the cause of the low birth rate as well as an effective method to improve population growth. Scholars honed in on a number of sociocultural issues that affected women's lives, isolating and identifying these instances as the sole cause for the population decline and implying that the removal

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sumiko Iwao, *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 130.

of these impediments would aid in population growth. This thesis has categorized these singular facets of Japanese culture that influence a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child into different groups, which are elaborated upon in the ensuing sections of this introduction. These categories were created based on what part of society the factor came from, rather than whether the factors helped or hurt the birth rate. Therefore, each category includes features that both work to improve the birth rate, as well as those that work against it. This is designed to maintain a greater focus on the current condition of women. My research maintains that there is a disconnect between Japan's ideal gender model and the existing actuality of the situation that is brought about by the impediments to achieving the ideal. Ultimately, this thesis will show that the combination of these factors creates a systemic issue that lowers the birth rate.

Internal Factors

The division of the four different classifications is first based on internal and external elements. Internal factors are further split into individual and public stimuli. Internal, individual factors refer to the personal life experiences that may guide a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child, and are expressed in ways that are specific to that particular member of society. For instance, if a woman was raised by conservative parents, she may place greater importance on getting married and having children earlier in her life. The ideal gender model for women is included in this group, which stereotypes women as housewives and mothers.²⁸ Although the ideal gender model is classified as an

²⁸ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*; Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan"; and Sievers, "Women in China, Japan, and Korea."

internal, individual factor, the implications of the idealized gender role are a recurring theme throughout this thesis.

There is a variety of internal, individual factors that influences a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child. For example, Brenda Robb Jenike, who researches gender ideology and transitions in social welfare in Japan, provided case studies of women who cared for their elderly in-laws. Jenike established that the burden of elder care placed solely on the daughter-in-law served as a deterrent for marriage and children altogether for some women.²⁹ Another example can be taken from John Traphagan's research. Traphagan assessed how the question of co-residence between the couple and the husband's parents became a source of conflict both prior to and during marriage.³⁰ While many societal components, like the idealized female gender role, served to encourage women to have children in the past, the ideal gender model is currently being challenged, creating a contradiction between the ideal that is sought after by the community and the current actuality of society.

Internal, public factors refer to instances where the values that are associated with the individual factors, like the idealized gender role for women, are upheld or challenged in public spaces, mass media, and popular culture. Many television shows, books, and movies break away from the mold set by the ideal gender model by depicting real situations

²⁹ Brenda Robb Jenike, "Parent Care and Shifting Family Obligations in Urban Japan," in *Demographic Change and the Family in Japan's Aging Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

³⁰ John W. Traphagan, "Contesting Coresidence: Women, In-laws, and Health Care in Rural Japan," in *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*, eds. Satsuki Kawano, Glenda Susan Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 203-228.

faced by women in contemporary Japanese society. Despite the fact that women are more often being represented in entertainment in roles other than motherhood, women who do not fulfill the idealized gender role in real life are still subject to social scrutiny. News coverage of Japan's low birth rate is highly suggestive of the stereotype for women to become mothers at an "appropriate" age. Women who remain unmarried and without children are given derogatory labels and are pushed to seek the protection of motherhood to avoid public reproach.

External Factors

External factors deal with the effect of the governmental, corporate, and economic establishment on its citizens. This category is further separated into economic and institutional factors. External, economic factors address how personal and national economies impact a woman's decision of whether or not to have children. The economic collapse of the 1990s, commonly referred to as the "bubble bursting," continues to impact contemporary Japanese society by sustaining a fear of the future.³¹ Anxiety regarding economic insecurity motivates women to pursue individual financial gain with the intended goal of saving for marriage and raising children, which is a costly endeavor in Japan.³² This personal economic acquisition, however, results in single women choosing to maintain their economic independence longer, rather than seeking marriage, for which they would be compelled to leave their careers and thus rely entirely on their husband's income.

³¹ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8.

³² Masahiro Hori, "The Expenditure on Children in Japan," Economic and Social Research Institute Discussion Paper Series No. 279 (Cabinet Office, 2011).

External, institutional factors specifically refer to the influence of the government via public policies, and businesses through corporate environment. The responsibilities of women in marriage, specifically in childbearing and rearing, prevent women from professional pursuits by forcing them to choose between marriage and family or a career.³³ As mentioned previously, women have been historically expected to leave the workforce and become a housewife and mother upon marriage.³⁴ Some critics remain staunch supporters of this norm, since as few as two percent of births occur outside of the institution of marriage.³⁵ The ideal is also reflected in the corporate environment, which excludes women and upholds men as ideal employees. Patricia Boling, who specializes in Japanese gender and public policy, claimed that the rigid corporate structure that exists in Japan is accountable for preventing shared responsibility of childcare by both parents and contributes to gender inequality, which creates another barrier to boosting the birth rate.³⁶ Corporate environment upholds the ideal gender model, which can be seen in the overall

³³ Kumagai, *Families in Japan*, 144; Jeff Kingston, *Contemporary Japan: History, Politics, and Social Change Since the 1980s* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 45; and Ezra Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 271.

³⁴ Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*; Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan"; and Tachibanaki Toshiaki, *The New Paradox for Japanese Women: Greater Choice, Greater Inequality*, trans. Mary Foster (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2010).

³⁵ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 3; and Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*.

³⁶ Patricia Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility," *Population and Development Review* 34 (2008).

lack of female participation in the workforce and the lack of female representation in managerial positions.³⁷

The Japanese government has responded to the predictions of population and economic decline by instituting a number of public policies aimed at improving population growth, but the birth rate continues to stagnate.³⁸ The policies have generally focused on alleviating the cost of child rearing, and improving access to and quality of care facilities for children and the elderly.³⁹ Scholars have conducted international comparisons of Japan's pro-fertility policies and found that, although similar policies were quite effective in other nations, Japan's public policies have been generally ineffective at boosting population growth, indicating a greater cause for the low birth rate than poor policy making.⁴⁰ The idealized gender role of women as homemakers and caregivers is reinforced by gender discrimination in the corporate environment and the lack of childcare facilities in communities. Again, there is a divergence between the ideal, for which women must prioritize their role as mothers, and reality, in which women must face and overcome

³⁷ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2015 - Japan," accessed November 29, 2015, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/economies/#economy=JPN>.

³⁸ Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population"; and Noriyuki Takayama and Martin Werding, eds. *Fertility and Public Policy: How to Reverse the Trend of Declining Birth Rates* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011).

³⁹ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, "Koyō kintō jidō fukushi (Equal Employment and Child Welfare)," in *Seido no gaiyō oyobi kiso tōkei (Overview of the System and the Basic Statistics)*. Annual Health, Labor and Welfare Report 2013-2014.

⁴⁰ Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility."

obstacles in the corporate environment that would allow them the economic security to achieve the ideal.

Summary

This thesis examines the ways in which Japan's recognized ideals and the contemporary reality are incompatible. In doing so, I will also explore how increased reinforcement of the ideal gender model does not improve the birth rate, but in fact highlights the network of barriers to achieving population growth that exists in Japan. Although specific examples of factors will be discussed in each chapter, there is not any single feature responsible for the low birth rate. Instead, it is a seemingly inevitable outcome to the systemic problem that forms when these factors occur simultaneously in society. Because the current birth rate is perceived as a fertility crisis, women and the roles they play are subject to intense scrutiny from mass media, being the target audience of many public policies, and the focus of much academic research. By discussing the different aspects of society that indicate that the birth rate has a systemic cause, I will then suggest possible constructive solutions to improving population growth through greater gender equality.

II. INTERNAL, INDIVIDUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE A WOMAN'S DECISION ABOUT CHILDBEARING

As researchers began exploring the various ways in which society governs women's lives and their decision of whether or not to have children, they found a number reasons or situations that were internalized by the individual.⁴¹ Some generalizations are drawn from shared characteristics, such as if a woman was raised by liberal or conservative parents, if she is the eldest daughter, and so on. My approach categorizes these broad and varied attributes as internal, individual factors, which highlight the internalized pressure on women to become and prioritize their role as mothers.

The primary element that will be investigated in this chapter is the ideal female gender model, which is a theme that will continue to be discussed throughout the thesis. Idealized gender roles are behaviors learned and internalized by a person as appropriate to their sex and are often determined by prevailing cultural norms.⁴² Female gender expectations have been well researched in relation to women's role in Japan's low birth rate. The ideal gender model in Japan prescribes women to marry and leave the workforce to become a homemaker and mother.⁴³ This is the ideal and does not reflect the reality, in which working mothers and other alternative roles exist. Despite the fact that the ideal

⁴¹ Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan"; and Traphagan and Knight, *Demographic Changes and the Family*.

⁴² *Oxford Dictionaries*, "gender," accessed October 22, 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/gender.

⁴³ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*; Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan"; and Sievers, "Women in China, Japan, and Korea."

gender model in Japan serves to encourage women to have children, the birth rate has been in steady decline since the post-war period. This apparent contradiction can be explained through the numerous barriers that women face and the subsequent rise in the prevalence of the alternative gender roles. As stated in the Introduction, alternative gender roles encompass the roles that women occupy when they have yet to achieve or have no interest in the ideal. In other words, alternative gender roles include the roles that women actually find themselves in.

Personal Relationships as a Barrier to Having Children

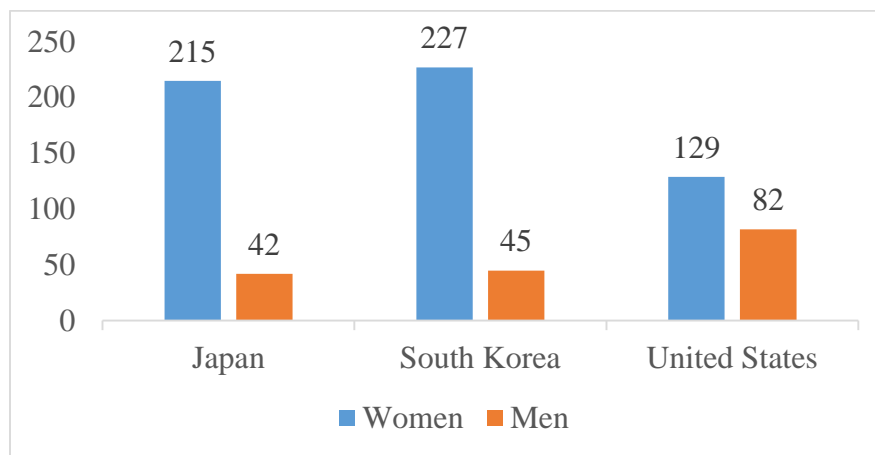
The intense social pressure on women to marry and have children should facilitate a higher birth rate, but with the birth rate so low, this is clearly not the case. So, why is the ideal gender model no longer a strong stimulus for women to have children? Research shows that women who adhered to the idealized gender role by becoming mothers and homemakers, and therefore forfeited a life outside the home, are now discouraging their female relatives from following in their footsteps.⁴⁴ This message may be direct, such as a mother deliberately telling her daughter to postpone marriage and focus on herself, or indirect, by a daughter seeing her female friends and relatives suffer in silence and wanting a different life for herself. Therefore, a woman's personal relationships may be a persuasive feature in her decision of whether or not to have a child.

There are three main private relationships that may affect a woman's decision about childbearing, which are with her partner, her parents, and her potential children. The various caregiving roles to these relationships and the related household chores that are

⁴⁴ Traphagan and Knight, *Demographic Change and the Family*.

demanded of women discourage some of them from having children or getting married altogether, since the pressure for women to have children intensifies once she is married.⁴⁵ Japan is recognized as having particularly high expectations of mothers to provide quality, hands-on child care.⁴⁶ As shown in Figure 2.1 below, in 2011, Japanese women spent an average of three hours and thirty-five minutes a day on housework and childrearing activities, according to a national survey.⁴⁷

Figure 2.1. Average Time Spent Daily on Household Duties by Gender (in Minutes) in Japan, South Korea, and the United States⁴⁸



Men spent forty-two minutes per day on the same activities. For an international comparison, in the United States, women spent an average of two hours and nine minutes

⁴⁵ Boling, “Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan’s Low Fertility.”

⁴⁶ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 213-214.

⁴⁷ Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, “2011 Survey of Time Use and Leisure Activities,” accessed November 6, 2015, <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/shakai/2011/gaiyo.htm>.

⁴⁸ Statistics Bureau, “2011 Survey of Time Use and Leisure Activities”; Bureau of Labor Statistics, “2014 American Time Use Survey;” and The Korea Herald, “Korean Men Do Less Housework in OECD.”

and men spent about one hour twenty-two minutes on household chores.⁴⁹ The statistics for South Korea were very similar to those of Japan.⁵⁰ Men spent an average of forty-five minutes per day, while women spent around three hours and forty-seven minutes on household chores each day.

According to Sumiko Iwao's study, "a larger proportion of women in the generation that entered adulthood in the 1980s are of the opinion that husbands should share the housework."⁵¹ Although women would prefer to share the household responsibilities with their partner, this is unlikely to be the reality and may contribute to the preference for later marriage. Wives seek greater balance with their husbands in sharing the responsibility of household duties, though there is little formal incentive for men to engage in a stronger role in childrearing and household duties.⁵² Patricia Boling described both the isolated and high stress nature of childrearing, which many women saw "as a daunting task that they feel ill-prepared to meet, have few resources to help them learn, and with which their husbands provide little help."⁵³ Women witness the encumbrance placed on their mothers and other female relations as sole caregivers for their children, which may prompt them to postpone marriage and childbirth in order to avoid this additional burden.

⁴⁹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, "2014 American Time Use Survey," United States Department of Labor, 2015.

⁵⁰ The Korea Herald, "Korean Men Do Less Housework in OECD," December 7, 2015, accessed April 7, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20151207000891>.

⁵¹ Iwao, *The Japanese Woman*, 89.

⁵² Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan."

⁵³ Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility," 316.

Parents are another type of personal relationship that women may consider. John Traphagan and John Knight studied the *ie*, a family system where a couple's male child and his wife reside with his parents, and examined the traditional role of the *yome*, or daughter-in-law.⁵⁴ As part of the idealized gender role for women, the *yome* moved in with her husband and his parents after marriage and cared for her parent-in-laws in their old age. Traphagan and Knight pointed out that parents are relying on their own daughters for eldercare at an increasing rate, too.⁵⁵ Because of this fact, there is a preference for girls among expecting couples as a form of social security.⁵⁶ In addition to the responsibilities associated with being a mother, women are often relied upon to provide care for their aging parents or in-laws, as well.⁵⁷ Traphagan and Knight claimed that the role of the *yome* is dying out, as women's values changed over time. In their research, Traphagan and Knight noted that "the *yome* role is being renegotiated by Japanese women who either refuse to accept the traditional responsibilities of the *yome* or set new conditions for fulfilling this role."⁵⁸

Scholars have found that Japan's aging society is partly responsible for this shift in values. With an average life expectancy of eighty-three years of age, women who choose

⁵⁴ Traphagan and Knight, *Demographic Changes and the Family*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵⁶ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 14.

⁵⁷ Naoko Muramatsu and Hiroko Akiyama, "Japan: Super-Aging Society Preparing for the Future," *The Gerontologist* 51 (2011): 429.

⁵⁸ Traphagan and Knight, *Demographic Changes and the Family*, 8.

to become a *yome* can presume to fulfill the role into their sixties, when they may be in need of care themselves.⁵⁹ Many women are aware of this fact and are abandoning the *yome* role entirely. Boling comments on this rising trend, stating:

...there is less pressure on a young woman to 'go as a bride' into a husband's family, and less willingness on a young woman's part to do so, especially given traditional expectations that she will live under her mother-in-law's thumb for decades, until her parents-in-law require her care in their senescence.⁶⁰

Thus, women are making the personal choice not to become a *yome* and are receiving less insistence from their partners and family than previous generations to do so.

The custom for a woman to move in with her husband and his parents was typically only relevant if the husband was the heir to the household, which was usually the firstborn son. Traphagan reported case studies where co-residence between the couple and the husband's parents became a topic of conflict, even among couples where the son was not the firstborn. In Traphagan's research, one woman said that, even though her husband was not the eldest, she ended up taking care of his aging parents because he wanted "to do *oya kōkō* (filial piety [a Confucian value that children must care for their parents]) one time before [his parents] die."⁶¹ Though in actuality, the son did very little to care for his parents and transferred the obligatory duty to his wife. She claimed that "if I knew that he was

⁵⁹ World DataBank, "Life Expectancy at Birth by Country," accessed January 4, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN>.

⁶⁰ Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility," 318.

⁶¹ Traphagan and Knight, *Demographic Changes and the Family*, 215.

going to become the *atotori* [heir] and we would have to live with his parents, I don't think I would have married him.”⁶²

Many of the women in the case studies, whether they knew they would be caregivers upon marriage or not, demanded a separate residence from their in-laws, which sometimes caused marital and/or intergenerational conflict. As more women gained increased independence, the question of co-residence became a greater point of contention. The demand for an independent residence as a condition for marriage is becoming more commonplace, but the desire to avoid confrontation or to “avoid living under a mother-in-law's thumb” may also be a cause for the decreased preference for marriage by women, and thereby lowering the birth rate.

Another example of how personal relationships can influence a woman's decision about childbearing can be drawn from Brenda Robb Jenike. Jenike's field research included interviews with daughter-in-laws who sought out government-funded elder care options to supplement services or relieve some of the burden of caring for their elderly in-laws.⁶³ Many of the situations reported that these daughters-in-law, often in their fifties or older, had provided in-home care for their elderly in-laws for several years already, decades in some cases. Jenike described the declining physical and psychological health of the caregiving daughters-in-law, and the subsequent improvement to their health after state-sponsored services began. Often, these women spoke of the desire for help from their husbands and families initially but resorted to using government programs when their

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Jenike, “Parent Care and Shifting Family Obligations in Urban Japan.”

husband or other relatives would not share the responsibility. In a few of the cases, the husband was not the eldest, but certain circumstances required his wife to take the role of the *yome*.⁶⁴ Similar to the reports from Traphagan's research, the women often claimed that they would not have agreed to marry their husbands if they knew they would become the primary daughter-in-law, meaning that they would take on the responsibilities of the *yome*.⁶⁵ Jenike established that the encumbrance of elder care placed solely on the daughter-in-law was great enough to warrant the need for such government programs and served as a deterrent for marriage altogether for some women.

The Ideal Female Gender Model as a Stimulus for Childbirth

Since the Meiji era of the late 1800s, women have been the primary caregivers for children and are compelled to maintain that role as their priority throughout their lives. This is evident in the Meiji government-endorsed phrase *ryōsai kenbo*, meaning “good wife and wise mother.”⁶⁶ Social mentalities, such as the phrase that is now considered sexist by feminist scholars, perpetuate the ideal of women based on their sexual reproductive capabilities, enforcing a gendered and limited role on women in Japanese society.⁶⁷

The term *ryōsai kenbo* originally came about in the late nineteenth century, when Japan sought to redefine itself as a “modern” nation, as outlined by many imperialist Western nations of the time. One of the foci for change was to reform the Japanese family

⁶⁴ Traphagan and Knight, *Demographic Changes and the Family*, 215.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

system, and thus the role of women. Sharon Sievers, a Japanese historian, commented on the changing role of women:

These thinkers (Fukuzawa Yukichi and Mori Arinori, among them) argued that, since mothers were going to bear much of the responsibility for teaching a new generation of young Japanese to be more independent and to think critically, women would have to be treated with more respect.⁶⁸

Fukuzawa Yukichi and Mori Arinori were a couple of the founders of modern Japan who believed that women should hold greater power, not just in their private lives, but in the public realm, as well. The improved status of women, especially in education, became associated with the phrase “good wife, wise mother,” designed to empower women with greater access for their own education and greater authority in the education of children. *Ryōsai kenbo* was quickly adopted and promoted by early feminists of the late nineteenth century.⁶⁹

By the early twentieth century, however, the Japanese government took hold of the phrase “good wife, wise mother” for their own propaganda, and “combined archaic Neo-Confucian prescriptions for women’s acceptance of their gendered, limited roles in Japanese society, and added something new: mothering as the principal gendered role of women.”⁷⁰ At that time, the Japanese government set gender equality back significantly by identifying and limiting women’s agency to motherhood. The government’s response to the early feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was harsh, stripping women of many of their basic rights, and severely punishing advocates of social

⁶⁸ Sievers, “Women in China, Japan, and Korea,” 198.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 200.

change by sentencing them to prison or death.⁷¹ Sievers remarked on the change in the meaning of *ryōsai kenbo*:

If the original intent of ‘good wife, wise mother’ had been to justify increasing education for women, and by extension, greater public engagement in political issues on the basis of their increased responsibility in the family, the state’s version represented an effort to keep women in their places, at home.⁷²

Although the phrase “good wife, wise mother” had feminist beginnings, the government’s version has survived more prominently, manipulating the ideal of Japanese women today by confining women to homely duties and restricting their pursuit of professional and political activities.

Although it blurs the line between internal, individual factors and internal, public factors, it is necessary to briefly mention the primary group that supports the ideal gender model. Conservatives are strong supporters of this conventional view in Japan, especially in the political arena, with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party among some of the most notable proponents. Some of today’s older, male conservative politicians utilize their access and visibility in mass media to blame women as consciously and purposefully preventing population growth, unsympathetic or unaware of the challenges that contribute to women’s struggle in deciding whether or not to have a child. Often, these challenges result in the choice being made for a woman, where economic, professional, or personal reasons may cause her to postpone or remove marriage from her life course. Today, most outspoken traditionalists are not supported by the majority of the population and are often

⁷¹ Mikiso Hane, trans. and ed., *Reflections on the Way to the Gallows: Rebel Women in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁷² Sievers, “Women in China, Japan, and Korea,” 201.

penalized for their actions. Despite these consequences, conservatives strengthen the gendered and limited view of women by continuing to criticize them in relation to the low birth rate. Although the essence of the idealized female gender role seeks to increase population growth, such uninformed reinforcement serves to alienate women further from the ideal, does not aid in removing the impediments that women encounter, and only serves to contribute to the internal struggle experienced by women. More direct issues related to the internal, public factors will be presented in the next chapter.

Research shows that many Japanese women do want to become mothers.⁷³ According to a 2010 survey, the desired number of children has increased slightly in the past five years among never-married women (to 2.12 children), yet decreased slightly among men (to 2.04 children).⁷⁴ This would suggest, as Susan Holloway, a Child Development and Education scholar whose focus is on Japanese mothers and children, said so well, “that most women in Japan as elsewhere would like to become mothers if societal conditions permitted them to have children and to live a full, satisfying life.”⁷⁵

Summary

The Meiji ideal of “good wife, wise mother” has had a lasting influence on Japanese society in terms of how women are valued and what roles they are presumed to uphold. In describing the enduring effect of “good wife, wise mother,” Kathleen Uno said, “a transmuted vision of women that often emphasized their difference from men as

⁷³ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 5.

homebound wives and mothers continued to influence state policies toward welfare, education, employment, sexuality, and reproduction at least until the late 1980s.”⁷⁶ In contrast to the progressive intentions of *ryōsai kenbo*, the conservative government of the Meiji era changed the meaning of the phrase to create an ideal of women based on their sexual reproductive capabilities, enforcing a gendered and limited role on women. This continues to affect the ideal gender model of Japanese women today by coaxing women to prioritize their caregiving roles to their husbands, children, and parents. Yet, the burden of these roles is giving cause for women to delay marriage and childbirth. A woman’s personal relationships may be a powerful factor in her decision about childbearing that is neutralizing the intense societal pressure to conform to the idealized female gender role. The burden of caregiving to husband, children, parents, and in-laws that is placed on women is great enough to discourage them from having children, and in some cases from getting married in the first place.

The ideal gender model pushes women to have children while a woman’s personal relationships may pull her away from motherhood. This represents one of the ways that women experience a dynamic internal struggle in their decision to have a child in contemporary Japan. Personal relations and the ideal gender model are not the only factors in a woman’s struggle, but are two of the most significant factors in this category, and thus were offered as examples of internal, individual factors that impact a woman’s decision about childbearing.

⁷⁶ Kathleen Uno, “The Death of ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’?,” *Postwar Japan as History* (1993): 295.

Because of the varied nature of experiences from person to person, there are a number of considerations for a woman's choice of whether or not to have a child that fall into the category of internal, individual factors. Researchers have isolated and identified these specific ways, such as the demand for women to fulfill the role of the *yome*, as the singular cause for the low birth rate. Indeed, the burden of such a caregiving role may sway a woman's decision to not have a child, but it is not the only reason for declined preference. Instead, the low birth rate is an outcome that occurs when the combination of all categories—internal, individual; internal, public; external, economic; and external, institutional factors—happens in society simultaneously. This thesis holds that the low birth rate is the result of a systemic problem.

III. INTERNAL, PUBLIC FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE A WOMAN'S DECISION ABOUT CHILDBEARING

Both internal, individual factors and internal, public factors deal with matters that are likely to be internalized by a person, from the emotional nature of deciding whether or not to have a child. The difference between the two categories lies in how the internalized component is manifest in society. Internal, individual factors refer to a person's unique life experiences, reflecting values that are brought about by their upbringing. These characteristics and values are impressed upon a woman through circumstances that are unique to her, such as from a parent or community member. Internal, public factors refer to instances where the standards that are associated with the ideal gender model are displayed and often upheld in public spaces, mass media, and popular culture. This chapter will explore examples of how private concerns, such as the decision about childbearing, are discussed publicly. One way that this occurs, for example, is through the stories of television shows and movies.

Although I have assigned a different aspect to each chapter, there is not a greater emphasis placed on any one particular section as the cause for the population decline. This thesis demonstrates that there is no specific trait in society that is the source for the low birth. It is the condition that is formed when these elements work together that inhibits population growth. Moreover, the very existence of internal, public factors reveals the societal mentality that the private decision of whether or not to have a child is within the realm of public concern. This social phenomenon offers opportunities, however, to examine the difference between the idealized and alternative gender roles, which highlights the struggle that women go through in their decision about childbearing. Like internal,

individual factors, the sponsorship of the idealized gender role of women in mass media should motivate women to have children, yet the opposite holds true. This paradox will be explored in the ensuing sections.

Challenges to the Ideal Female Gender Model in Mass Media

Yoshio Sugimoto, a renowned scholar and prolific writer on Japanese society, claims that “mass culture in contemporary Japan is a lively and potent force that affects numerous people through mass media,” which includes television and popular press.⁷⁷ Thus, the ideas and values represented in the various forms of mass culture pervade the everyday lives of Japanese citizens. Midori Suzuki described the effect of television on women’s thinking, stating:

Integrally related to this issue concerns the ways women are portrayed on television, which tend to be highly stereotyped and biased. Most women, however, are not aware of this, so that the influence of television on their thinking and behavior, both consciously and unconsciously, is all the more extensive.⁷⁸

Suzuki explained that women are often presented in mass media in the conservative stereotype of mothers and wives. However, it can be argued that mass culture is a double-edged sword. The same platform of mass media can be used to easily and effectively promote the ideals of conservatives and feminists alike.

Take, for example, the genre of *manga*, Japanese comic books that are read by all ages. One such *manga* titled *Sazae-san* ran in the *Asahi* newspaper from 1946 to 1974, and

⁷⁷ Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 250.

⁷⁸ Midori Suzuki, “Women and Television: Portrayal of Women in Mass Media,” in *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1995), 76.

continues to air on Japanese television today as an *anime*, or cartoon. Sugimoto writes in regards to *Sazae-san*:

The best-known postwar Japanese cartoonist, Machiko Hasegawa, was a woman who penned the comic strips that centered on the everyday life of a housewife named *Sazae-san*, and her family members. Serialized in the morning edition of the *Asahi* newspaper for more than three decades, *Sazae-san* became a household name and popularized a housewife's perspective on Japanese society throughout the postwar period.⁷⁹

Although the general plot of *Sazae-san* appears to conform to the conventional agenda, in that *Sazae-san* is a housewife and mother, *Sazae-san* herself personified the generation of young women that lived during the immediate post-war era who found liberation in Japan's new constitution, which included equal rights and suffrage for women.⁸⁰ The fact that *Sazae-san* was written by a woman about a woman and found such national success is a representation in itself of the changing role of women in Japan at that time.

Although many of the comics were humorous representations of the mundane, some strips highlighted key social issues and provided political commentary. Timothy Craig, a scholar of Japanese popular culture, stated, "In one [comic], for example, *Sazae-san* attends a public discussion on equal rights, at which she declares that men too must strive for women's liberation."⁸¹ Thus, Hasegawa was able to utilize the mass media form of *manga* to channel her progressive ideals, promote gender equality, and influence a large population of women. In a broad sense, *Sazae-san* is one of the many representations of feminist ideals broadcasted through mass media that may have swayed generations of

⁷⁹ Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 255.

⁸⁰ Timothy Craig, *Japan Pop!: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2000), 187.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

women to take a less passive role in their own lives, and prompted women to engage in a lifestyle apart from being a mother. Sazae-san served, and continues to serve in the *anime* as a role model for women and their daughters to break the mold of the submissive housewife, to claim their independence, and to pursue roles outside of motherhood. In other words, Sazae-san is a proponent of alternative gender roles.

When feminists are not the focus of mass media and traditional gender values are supported instead, feminist groups often utilize mass media to respond with criticism in kind. For instance, Vera Mackie, a professor of Japanese gender and sexuality studies, describes an instant noodle television commercial from 1975. “A woman makes up some instant noodles for her male partner, stating ‘I am the one who cooks them’. The man responds ‘I am the one who eats them’.”⁸² The clear division of labor, that the woman produces and the man consumes, caught the attention of the International Women’s Year Group, who had formed earlier that same year. In response to the commercial, the group lobbied against the extreme division of labor represented in the advertisement. Such gendered division of labor continues to exist in Japan today and may factor into a woman’s decision of whether or not to have a child.

As time goes on, however, movies and television series are shifting away from the pattern of the ideal gender model and are adapting more to the contemporary reality. More often, female characters are shown as single, in their thirties or older, and pursuing careers, reflecting the increasing prevalence of this group in real life. For instance, *Last Cinderella*

⁸² Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment, and Sexuality* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 174.

is a Japanese drama that aired in 2013.⁸³ The main character is a 39-year-old woman named Sakura Toyama, who is involved in a love triangle with two men. *Last Cinderella* acts as a forum to address existing views of gender ideals in Japanese society. The title itself implies the Western notion of a woman who goes from rags to riches solely because of her marriage but it is unclear if this was the intention of the show's writers. Sakura receives the pet name "Cinderella" from Hiroto, one of her love interests, because he found her shoe in a hotel stairwell after she had drunkenly tossed it aside. The word "last" also has several implications. For Sakura, society would say that this is her last chance to get married since she is turning forty. In a larger context, though, it could also mean that Cinderellas are a dying breed, thanks to alternative gender roles.

Sakura works at a beauty salon, but is a tomboy in fashion and behavior, with a morning routine that includes shaving her face and eating at a stand-only *ramen* (noodle) shop, where she is the only female customer. As she goes about town, she is shown unconsciously mirroring the gestures of her male counterparts. When she is working at the beauty salon, Sakura is depicted as highly dedicated to her career, knowledgeable in her position as Assistant Manager, and a kind and considerate community member. When chatting with a customer in the first episode, the client asks Sakura, "Are you not married yet?" To which Sakura replies, "My job is my husband right now."⁸⁴ Despite having worked as Assistant Manager at the salon for eight years, it is revealed that Sakura has been skipped over for a promotion opportunity three times, likely because of her age and despite

⁸³ Nakano Toshiyuki, *Last Cinderella*, television series, directed by Tanaka Ryo, Hirano Shin, and Sekino Munenori (Tokyo: Fuji Television, 2013).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

her qualifications. It is understood that Sakura has chosen to put her romantic life on hold, delaying marriage and therefore children, so that she can advance her career, a life course in an alternative gender role that is becoming increasingly common.

The show utilizes the supporting characters to represent other situations that women are more often finding themselves in. For example, Sakura's friend, Miki Takenouchi, upholds the idealized gender role of wife and mother but is suffering a sexless marriage. In one episode, she plans for a romantic evening with her husband, when her overbearing mother-in-law shows up unannounced. The mother-in-law immediately assumes the role of the oppressive stereotype, micromanaging Miki to further place her in the idealized gender role. Of course, the relationship between the two women is exaggerated, as the mother-in-law literally pushes Miki out of the way, but the weight of the roles of daughter-in-law, wife, and mother is apparent and relevant to the situation faced by many Japanese women, nonetheless. For some unmarried women, the scenario may serve as a warning of what may come and contributes to their struggle in deciding whether or not to have children.

The show uses Sakura and Rintaro Tachibana, Sakura's male boss and later love interest, to exemplify the different views of male and female gender ideals. In one scene, Sakura and Rintaro happen to end up at the same restaurant. When Sakura orders a beer, Rintaro criticizes her, stating that she should be more modest because a woman should not drink alcohol in the middle of the day. The following translated dialogue ensues:

Sakura: "So you're saying that men can drink during the day but women can't?"

Rintaro: "If women act like men, there will be no distinction between the sexes."

Sakura: “There’s nothing women aren’t allowed to do that men are.”

Rintaro: “That’s why you can never be successful. No matter how much women have progressed, it’s still a male-dominant society. Women that can’t kiss up to men won’t get far in their career or love life.”⁸⁵

Rintaro’s statement rings true for Sakura, who is still recovering from the realization that her company refuses to promote her, but she remains defiant, stating, “If kissing up to guys is the only way, I’d rather stay as I am now.” This dialogue verbalizes the problem that many women face, as women who do not conform to the ideal gender model are negatively impacted in other parts of their lives. This creates a dynamic situation where women are often forced to choose between having a career and having a family. The effect of employment on the lives of women and their childbearing decision will be covered in a later chapter as part of the external, institutional factors; however, *Last Cinderella* is an excellent example of how the elements discussed in this thesis can overlap. *Last Cinderella* deals with both internal, public factors and external, institutional factors by representing the perceptions of an unmarried, childless woman in a profession on a television show. Equally important, *Last Cinderella* depicts a woman in what has become an alternative gender role, but is still portrayed in a very positive light.

Similar topics have been presented in the forms of books and movies, as well. *Fear and Trembling*, for instance, is a novel that later became a film.⁸⁶ The story focuses mostly on the differences in cultures and business practices between Japan and the West, through

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Amélie Nothomb, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Adriana Hunter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001); and Amélie Nothomb, Johann Sebastian Bach, Thierry Derocles, Yves Angelo, Gen Shimaoka, et al, *Stupeur et tremblements (Fear and Trembling)* (United States: Home Vision Entertainment, 2005).

the eyes of Amélié Nothomb, a Belgian woman working in a Japanese company. However, the story does offer some insight into the lives of female workers of the time, through the story of the main character's manager. Fubuki is Amélié's unmarried supervisor who is deemed past the age of marriage at twenty-nine years old. Like Sakura from *Last Cinderella*, Fubuki has devoted herself to her career instead of focusing on her personal life, and has had to struggle for years to achieve a low level managerial position. Nothomb's perspective, although from an outsider, provides insight on the insistence for women to marry. In the novel, she describes how she sees Fubuki, and the lives of all Japanese women, stating, "if the Japanese woman is to be admired—and she is—it is because she doesn't commit suicide. Society conspires against her from her earliest infancy... 'If you are not married by the time you are twenty-five, you'll have good reason to be ashamed.'" ⁸⁷ Nothomb's narrative was written in the late 1990s, but the same societal pressure for Japanese women to marry and have children remains today. One way that this norm has changed, however, is the age at which it is "too late" for a woman to be married. In the 1990s, women were pressed to marry in their twenties. Today, as evidenced in mass media by shows like *Last Cinderella*, society acknowledges and is more accepting of the fact that women are not getting married and having children until their thirties. ⁸⁸ Due to

⁸⁷ Nothomb, *Fear and Trembling*, 66.

⁸⁸ Nakano, *Last Cinderella*; and Satoguchi Katsuaki, *Arafō (Around 40)*, television series, directed by Yoshida Ken (Tokyo: Tokyo Broadcasting System Television, 2008).

the synonymous nature of marriage and childbirth, though, there is a direct correlation between delayed marriage and the low birth rate.⁸⁹

The Value of the Ideal Female Gender Model Upheld in Mass Media

Although increasing in prevalence, depictions of single, childless women are still uncommon in Japan.⁹⁰ The idealized female gender role is the predominant role portrayed by females in mass culture.⁹¹ Take, for example, this photo in Figure 3.1 of an advertisement in the appliances department of a major retail store in the Shinjuku neighborhood of Tokyo that was taken in the summer of 2015:

Figure 3.1. “Happī Wedingu [Happy Wedding]” Advertisement in Bicqlo's Appliances Department in Tokyo, 2015. Photo courtesy of the author.



⁸⁹ Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan: An Ethnography of Real Lives and Consumerized Domesticity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 123; and Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*, 205.

⁹⁰ Suzuki, “Women and Television: Portrayal of Women in Mass Media,” 76.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The mannequin is dressed in a Western-style wedding dress and is placed right next to a washing machine and other household appliances with a sign that reads “*Happi Wedingu* [Happy Wedding].” The other mannequins in the area were also female, dressed in various outfits that the store sold. The store, however, did not sell wedding dresses. The choice of gender and dress for the mannequin as well as the message in the advertisement expresses a direct connection to and endorsement of women as homemakers. In other words, public spaces can be used in the same vein as mass media as a way of supporting the idealized gender role for women.

The main group that advocates for the ideal gender model is conservative politicians. Many of these civil servants use their position in the political arena to publicly accuse women as consciously and purposefully lowering the birth rate, unsympathetic or unaware of the challenges that contribute to women’s struggle in deciding whether or not to have a child. One scholar writes:

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Japanese media and public commentary in general tended to emphasize the generation gap between young, carefree, and indulgent women and their family-oriented, responsible mothers. Criticism of the young generation for its irresponsible lifestyle later became *bon ton* especially among conservative critics and politicians worried about Japan’s demographic problem, which was clearly linked to delayed marriage.⁹²

Today, many conservatives in Japan view the low birth rate as a crisis and judge women as the driving force for the declining population by not assuming their “proper” roles as “good wives and wise mothers.” The public criticism of women for the population decline

⁹² Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 123; and Lynne Nakano and Moeko Wagatsuma, “Mothers and Their Unmarried Daughters: An Intimate Look at Generational Change,” in *Japan’s Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?*, eds. Gordon Mathews and Bruce White (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

highlights the internal struggle that women go through when they want to have children but are unable to, which is made worse by public condemnation.

Many government officials have used their political platform to openly criticize women for not fulfilling the idealized gender role. Take, for instance, the following example discussed by Susan Holloway:

In 2003, former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, a member of a government commission charged with finding solutions to the population crisis, publicly attributed Japan's falling birth rate to the fact that Japanese women were too highly educated. He also expressed his opinion that the government should not provide a retirement pension to women who had dodged their civic duty to have children.⁹³

The message from former Prime Minister Mori is a near identical sentiment to the government's stance on what the role of women should be in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The fact that today's politicians echo a belief held during a time of oppression for women in Japan, unfortunately, indicates the strength of this gendered value of women, and implies the difficulty that Japan has had in moving towards greater gender equality.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration has been known to betray his platform for the advancement of women's interests on numerous occasions. In 2007, Abe's health minister at the time, Hakuo Yanagisawa, made a public statement, describing women as "birth-giving machines" and urging them to "do their best per head" to boost the nation's birth rate.⁹⁴ Yanagisawa's response to the ensuing criticism was that his description had

⁹³ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 4.

⁹⁴ McCurry, "Japanese Minister Wants 'Birth-giving Machines', aka Women, to Have More Babies."

been “too uncivil,” and left his position later that year.⁹⁵ The coldness of such comments demonstrates the detachment that conservative critics express towards women and their concerns.

Civil servants who speak on behalf of women’s interests, especially female politicians, are often singled out for denunciation and are subject to intense scrutiny, as if they personified the whole female population. In 2014, Tokyo lawmaker Ayaka Shiomura was addressing the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly about the capital’s child-rearing policy, when several assemblymen from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party shouted jeers like “Hurry and get married” and “Are you not able to have a baby?”⁹⁶ After significant public outcry and demands from Shiomura for the identification of the hecklers, one of the perpetrators confessed and was forced to resign from his position. A couple of months later, another Liberal Democratic Party Assemblyman, Zenji Nojima, commented on the event, stating that the trouble was not in the message of the taunts, but “the problem was that such a remark was made to an individual speaker in a public setting.”⁹⁷ The ignorance of Nojima’s statement is particularly surprising, since he made this statement after he had been appointed as head of a league that promotes gender equality. Thus, many conservative politicians endorse the ideal gender model, reducing the ability of women to sexual

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Masaaki Kameda, “Tokyo Assemblyman Leading Gender Equality Panel Apologizes for Sexist Remark,” *The Japan Times*, September 18, 2014, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/09/18/national/tokyo-assemblyman-leading-gender-equality-panel-apologizes-sexist-remark/#.VjvKdCuHyex>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

reproduction and remaining uninformed of the outlying causes that are disincentives for women to become mothers.

News media coverage on Japan's low birth rate is symptomatic of society's perspective of the ideal gender model. News coverage has been a major source of the labels created for various subpopulations, such as DINK's (Double Income No Kids), which describes married, working but childless couples. The majority of the terms related to the low birth rate, though, are designed to pass judgement on females, ignoring the challenges that women face and treating women as if they were actively choosing to lower the birth rate.⁹⁸

Lynne Nakano, a Yale researcher who studied single women in Tokyo, comments on the media portrayal of single women, stating, "Single women are described in remarkably negative terms in the Japanese mass media. One such term, for example, 'parasite singles' (*parasaito shinguru*) refers to adult single women who live with their parents."⁹⁹ The term *parasaito shinguru* became popularized in the 2000s, after sociologist Yamada Masahiro published his book, *Parasaito shinguru no jidai (The Age of the Parasite Singles)*.¹⁰⁰ In addition to the status of singlehood, the term implies that young Japanese women are "too free and overly selfish," and are "held responsible for the worsening economic crisis in Japan and appear as the symbol for the impasse at which contemporary

⁹⁸ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*.

⁹⁹ Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan," 163.

¹⁰⁰ Yamada Masahiro, *Parasaito shinguru no jidai* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1999).

Japanese society has found itself.”¹⁰¹ The term also does not take into account the reasons for this type of alternative role or the obstacles to achieving the ideal. Suzanne Hall Vogel and Steven Kent Vogel, researchers of Japanese culture and political science, stated, “While the expression parasite single has a negative meaning, many Japanese people have no choice but to live with their parents well into adulthood for financial reasons.”¹⁰² Chapter Five on external, economic factors will further explore the impact of finances on a women’s decision about childbearing, but the use of this derogatory term demonstrates the harsh social climate that women are subjected to when they do not conform to the idealized gender role.

NEETs (Not involved in Education, Employment, or Training) is a newer term that has taken the place of the term “parasite singles” in Japanese mass media and public discourse. Like parasite singles, NEETs are considered “problematic young people,” because they are not considered productive members of society.¹⁰³ Despite the fact that housewives, too, do not typically pursue education, employment or training, they are exempt from falling into this category because of the societal expectation that they will

¹⁰¹ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 50 and 194; and Nakano and Wagatsuma, “Mothers and Their Unmarried Daughters.”

¹⁰² Suzanne Hall Vogel and Steven Kent Vogel, *The Japanese Family in Transition: From the Professional Housewife Ideal to the Dilemmas of Choice* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 152.

¹⁰³ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 135; and Gordon Mathews and Bruce White, “Introduction: Changing Generations in Japan Today,” in *Japan’s Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?* eds. Gordon Mathews and Bruce White (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 6.

fulfill the duties of mothers and homemakers.¹⁰⁴ Thus, if women do not conform to the idealized gender role by becoming mothers, they are given a derogatory label and are subject to intensely negative social criticism, despite the systemic mechanisms in place that prevent them from achieving professional development.

Some of the terms used to describe women are derived from television shows. *Arafō* (*Around 40*), for example, is a television drama about a 39-year-old psychiatrist who, despite feeling satisfied with a successful career, is “constantly reminded that ‘if you want children, you should marry now’ and that ‘this is women’s happiness,’” referring to motherhood.¹⁰⁵ The title, *Arafō*, has come to label the population of women who first started the trend of alternative female gender roles by postponing marriage in order to pursue their education and careers. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, a researcher of gender and women in Japan, claims that “after working hard, thus delaying marriage, [the *arafō* generation] were labeled loser dogs.”¹⁰⁶ The term “loser dogs” is yet another catchphrase to identify the *arafō* population, and was first used by Sakai Junko in her book, *Makeinu no tōboe* (*The Howl of the Loser Dogs*) in 2003.¹⁰⁷ Despite its misleading title, the feminist novel focused on the freedom associated with being single.

Not all female portrayals in mass media revolve around criticism or illicit a feminist response. The idealized female gender roles of housewife and mother are so firmly fixed

¹⁰⁴ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*.

¹⁰⁵ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 245; and Satoguchi, *Arafō* (*Around 40*).

¹⁰⁶ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 211.

¹⁰⁷ Sakai Junko, *Makeinu no tōboe* (*Howl of the Loser Dog*) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2003).

in Japanese culture that milder representations are often overlooked and accepted as part of daily life. Midori Suzuki pointed out that “married women characters, whether depicted as employed outside the home or not, are shown in their ‘places’: in housekeeping roles—cooking, shopping, laundering—and as the caretakers of husbands and children.”¹⁰⁸ This canon holds true for the married characters in the television series discussed in this chapter. In *Last Cinderella*, Sakura’s married friend, Miki, is often shown in the context of her roles as wife and mother.¹⁰⁹ In *Arafō*, Satako’s married friend, Takeuchi Mizue, is usually shown in her role as a full-time housewife.¹¹⁰ Thus, the idealized gender role is present even in media forms that seek to break away from the norm. Mass media that depicts alternative while still acknowledging the pressure of the ideal gender model is symbolic of the struggle that many women endure in their decision of whether or not to have a child.

Summary

Internal, public factors alone are not reason enough to cause the low birth rate, but are proven more effective in lowering the birth rate when working simultaneously with the other factors discussed in this thesis. Although individual and public factors both deal with subjects that are internalized, internal, public factors refer to the manifestation of ingrained influences in public spaces, mass media, and popular culture. Because of the easy access to a wide audience, internal, public factors are able to support the ideal gender model on a

¹⁰⁸ Suzuki, “Women and Television: Portrayal of Women in Mass Media,” 79.

¹⁰⁹ Nakano, *Last Cinderella*.

¹¹⁰ Satoguchi, *Arafō (Around 40)*.

national level and are a strong influence on women to conform to the idealized gender role, which advocates for marriage and children.

Not all forms of mass media represent women as submissive housewives, however. Created seventy years ago, *Sazae-san* is one of the most well-known and long-lasting *manga* in Japan. As a housewife and mother, she was easily relatable to her readers. As a feminist, she struck a chord with the generation of women that came into adulthood during the postwar era, who were armed with a new constitution and sought to take a less passive role in their lives. *Sazae-san* may have been one of the first postwar female representations to inspire real women to pursue identities beyond motherhood.

Many television shows, books, and movies, like *Last Cinderella*, *Arafō*, and *Fear and Trembling*, break away from the mold set by the idealized gender role by depicting real situations faced by women in contemporary Japanese society. More often, female characters are shown as single professionals in their thirties. These forms of entertainment also illustrate the social consequences for their lifestyles, such as the stigma of being forty and never married, as well as the personal loneliness of not having a family, something that resonates with women as they consider whether or not to have a child of their own. In addition to forming a relatable and genuine emotional connection to the audience, the shows are likely successful because of the increasing prevalence of single, thirty-somethings.

Despite the fact that women are more often being represented in entertainment in roles other than motherhood, women who do not fulfill the idealized gender role in real life are still subject to social scrutiny. News coverage of Japan's low birth rate is highly suggestive of the stereotype for women to become mothers at an "appropriate" age. Women

who remain unmarried and without children are labeled as “parasite singles,” and “loser dogs.” Meanwhile, when the category is broadened to include men, the terms take on a more neutral tone through the use of acronyms, such as “DINKs,” and “NEETs.” Thus, women are pushed to seek the protection of motherhood to avoid the public reproach.

The existence of internal, public factors is an interesting social phenomenon, because of the implication that private decisions like whether or not to have children are within the realm of public discourse. Because of this, mass culture often stresses the ideal of women as mothers, but is more often depicting them in alternative gender roles. With the birth rate as low as it currently is, the reinforcement of this ideal no longer appears to be effective. In fact, further partiality towards the idealized gender role seems to be detrimental to stimulating population growth by creating a distance between the existing lifestyles of women and the ideal that they are supposed to attain. The demands of motherhood in public perception are becoming increasingly incompatible with current realities.

Because women are often shown as upholding the idealized gender role in mass culture, however, the pressure to conform to this ideal is well rooted in Japan’s social mentality and begins from an early age.¹¹¹ Midori Suzuki said, “In this way, women are from childhood bound to the traditional view of the sexual division of labor,” in which women are designated to the home and men to the office.¹¹² This chapter has already touched on some components related to external, institutional factors, such as the corporate

¹¹¹ Suzuki, “Women and Television: Portrayal of Women in Mass Media,” 79.

¹¹² Ibid.

culture represented in *Fear and Trembling*, which will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Five; however, examples of societal aspects that are a combination of the four factors presented in this thesis only work to strengthen the argument for a systemic cause to the low birth rate.

IV. EXTERNAL, ECONOMIC FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE A WOMAN'S DECISION ABOUT CHILDBEARING

From this point, I will move on from the internal factors to external factors, which deal with the effect of the government, corporate, and economic establishment on society. This category is further separated into economic factors, referring to both private and public economies, and institutional factors, meaning the corporate and governmental impact on people's lives. This chapter will focus on how external, economic factors influence a woman's childbearing choice and contributes to the internal-external binary struggle that women experience while making this decision.

As mentioned in the Introduction, many researchers are concerned about the low birth rate because of the implications caused by the lack of replenishment to the workforce population in the near future.¹¹³ With a third of the population projected to be over 65 years old in 2050, there is an increased demand for government programs, like social security and public health insurance, which are funded largely in part by the revenue generated by the workforce.¹¹⁴ In other words, there is an increased expenditure from the growing elderly population, but less contribution from the shrinking workforce, which will generate

¹¹³ Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population"; Ihuri, et al., "Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan"; and Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*.

¹¹⁴ Dekle, "The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population"; and Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*, 205.

significant public debt.¹¹⁵ For this reason, there is a strong national motivation to increase the birth rate in order to improve population growth and economic prospects.

Economic cost, however, is one of the leading reported causes for delayed marriage and childbearing among Japanese individuals.¹¹⁶ This personal economic drain grows greater as couples have more children and the norm of couples having only one child is on the rise.¹¹⁷ One of the greatest expenses of raising children in Japan is allocated to education.¹¹⁸ Having gone through the process of the education system themselves, many young adults are aware of the substantial cost of childrearing and choose to postpone having children until they think they can afford it.¹¹⁹

Because the cost of raising children is significant enough, many women postpone marriage in order to delay having children, with the intention of saving money so that they can afford that phase of their life in the near future.¹²⁰ Once the decision to delay marriage and children has been made, however, the resolution to remain single is strengthened by the experience of enhanced economic autonomy, resulting in a longer period of singlehood.

¹¹⁵ Dekle, “The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population”; and Ihori, et al., “Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan.”

¹¹⁶ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8.

¹¹⁷ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 12; and Hori, “The Expenditure on Children in Japan,” 1.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*; and Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*.

In addition to the individual's private economy, the state of the national economy has also been shown to affect the national birth rate. The economic collapse of the late 1990s, for example, brought about a fear of the future.¹²¹ This period of time in Japanese history, known as the bursting of the economic "bubble," brought further attention to Japan's low birth rate as well as the role of women in society. According to Cargill and Sakamoto, "The public also faced new problems that were not visible or problematic during the rapid economic growth and the "bubble" economy."¹²² These issues had previously gone unnoticed, masked by the economic success that the country experienced during the postwar period. The generation that grew up during the economic "bubble" and entered adulthood when the "bubble" burst lived through a sudden decline in both private and state economies, fostering a distrust in state financial institutions and spurring a fear of future economic insecurity. Although this distrust affects men and women alike, this thesis maintains a focus on the issues that impact women, since they are the ones that shoulder the blame in public discourses for the low birth rate. For women, this fear urges them to maintain their careers and postpone marriage, with the intended goal of saving money for the costly endeavor of married life and raising children.¹²³ The subsequent financial gain, however, results in many single women choosing to maintain their financial independence longer, rather than pursuing marriage, where they would be expected to leave their jobs and rely on their husband's income.

¹²¹ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8.

¹²² Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 46.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

Personal Economy as a Hindrance to Improving the Birth Rate

The high financial cost of raising children directly affects the population decline.¹²⁴

The cards begin to stack against the birth rate when a couple first begins to consider getting married. The ideal gender model encourages women to leave the workforce upon marriage. The loss of income contributes to the cost of married life. This is supported by a survey from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, which found that one of the leading reasons for delayed or lack of interest in having children among singles is credited to the economic cost of marriage and childrearing. The survey states:

The [Japanese National Fertility] survey asked the never-married people who intend to get married what they saw as potential obstacles if they were to get married within a year. ‘Money for marriage’ was the most often selected answer for both men and women [43.5% for men, 41.5% for women].¹²⁵

There is a direct correlation to the cost of married life and the low birth rate, as economic costs are causing couples to get married and have children later in life. The survey explains, “Couples are meeting one another at older ages, the length of courtship has lengthened, and the trend of later marriage has further strengthened.”¹²⁶ As couples spend their youth saving up funds in order to have children or postponing the cost, there are less fertile years available to them to have children. Additionally, there is a positive correlation between the

¹²⁴ Iwao, *The Japanese Woman*; Seiritsu Ogura and Tamotsu Kadoda, “Effects of Public Policies and the Labor Market on the Fertility of Japanese Women: Analyses of Municipal Data,” in *Fertility and Public Policy: How to Reverse the Trend of Declining Birth Rates*, eds. Noriyuki Takayama, and Martin Werding (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 81-110; and Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*.

¹²⁵ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8.

¹²⁶ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 2.

age group of female participants and the selection of “hate to bear children in older age” as an obstacle to having children (38%).¹²⁷ This signifies that financial stability achieved later in life is not a motivator for childbirth for over a third of the population. It is necessary, therefore, to curb the costs of marriage and childrearing in order to facilitate initiating that stage of life at younger, more fertile years.

The discrepancy between the ideal number of children and the actual number of children that a couple expects to have is suggestive of further economic impediments to the birth rate. The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research conducted another survey that specifically questioned married participants on their ideal number of children (2.42 children) and the number of children that they realistically intend to have (2.07 children).¹²⁸ In addressing the high ideal number but low achievement, the survey stated that “although childbearing intentions continue to be present among young couples, those intentions are not realized,” largely credited to the economic cost.¹²⁹ The survey reported that 65.9% of female survey participants chose the option “it costs too much to raise and educate children” as a hindrance to having children.¹³⁰

In 2001, a report from AIU Insurance found that “the cost of raising a child in Tokyo from birth to college graduation now [in 2001] ranges from 28.59 million yen [about

¹²⁷ Ibid, 12.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 10.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 12.

\$250,000 in 2001] to 63.01 million yen [about \$550,000 in 2001].”¹³¹ If a child was sent to public school throughout their life, the cost was the less expensive of the two options, indicating that education was the greatest determining reason in elevated cost.

In 2011, the Cabinet Office released a similar report with updated information, but the economic concerns remained. The report stated that “the total expenditure on the first child accumulated from birth through age 18 is approximately 16.5 million yen [about \$180,000 in 2008] based on 2004-2008 data.”¹³² There is a significant decrease in the reported cost of raising children between the two accounts, but this is in part because of the difference in ages included. The first report accounted for the cost of four-year universities, while the second does not. In comparison, the United States Department of Agriculture found that the average cost of raising a child to the age of eighteen in the United States was about \$245,000 as of 2013.¹³³ In 2011, the Korea Institute of Health and Social Affairs found the cost of raising a child to high school graduation to be around 194 million won (about \$172,000).¹³⁴ Figure 4.1 below illustrates the comparison of costs between these three countries, and demonstrates the similarity in cost between South Korea and Japan. While the cost of raising children in Japan appear to be lower than the United States,

¹³¹ “Raising Child Cost 63 Million Yen: Study,” *Japan Times*, May 15, 2001, accessed December 23, 2015, http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2001/05/15/national/raising-child-costs-63-million-yen-study/#.Vnw_z1IrdxV.

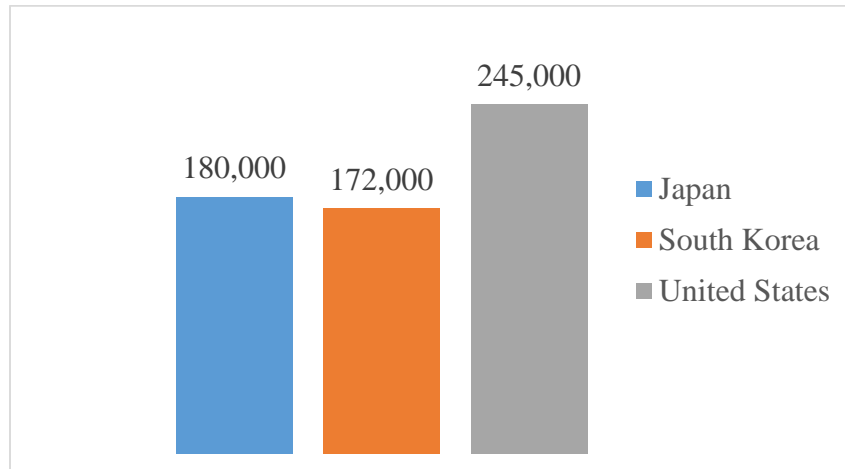
¹³² Hori, “The Expenditure on Children in Japan,” 1.

¹³³ United States Department of Agriculture, *Expenditures on Children by Families*, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, 2014.

¹³⁴ The Chosunilbo, “How Much Does it Cost to Raise a Child in Korea?,” January 4, 2011, accessed April 9, 2016, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/01/04/2011010400949.html.

this number does not include the income lost when a mother stops working to take care of her child.

Figure 4.1. International Comparison of the Cost of Raising Children (in U.S. Dollars)¹³⁵



The Cabinet Office report found that the greatest expenses were accrued from medical costs and education. The medical expense for a child under one-year-old was about 120,000 yen (\$1,300 in 2008), which did not include the delivery, an estimated cost of least 500,000 yen (\$5,500 in 2008).¹³⁶ As for education, the report states:

Annual household expenditure on education, which is assumed to be assignable only to children, appears to have two peaks, one around preschool years and one around high school years. The latter peak, around high school years (for the first child), exceeds 500,000 yen [\$5,500 in 2008], and is the largest item in child rearing expenditure.¹³⁷

These are direct expenses and do not include the cost of lost income incurred when a mother stops working in order to care for her child.

¹³⁵ Hori, “The Expenditure on Children in Japan,” 1; The Chosunilbo, “How Much Does it Cost to Raise a Child in Korea?;” and United States Department of Agriculture, *Expenditures on Children by Families*.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 12.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 13.

The Cabinet Office also found that the “average per child expenditure (accumulated over the same period) in a household with two children is reduced to about 11 million yen [about \$122,000 per child in 2008].” The study attributes the decrease in average cost per child to less available funds and parents who economize their budget with the second child. Despite the reduction in the amount spent per child, the overall cost increased by 5.5 million yen (about \$64,000 as of 2015), demonstrating that economic hardship increases as couples have more children. This fact is also reflected in the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research survey, which found that personal economy became an increasingly greater obstacle as couples had more children, typically limiting the couples to having one or two children.¹³⁸

Because the cost of raising children is significant enough, many women postpone getting married in order to delay having children. The decision to put off marriage and children is further strengthened by one of two resulting consequences, either a woman continues working and finds that she does not have time and money available for meeting a suitable partner, or a woman finds enjoyment in her financial autonomy. According to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, “the proportions of respondents who ‘pay special attention to clothing and personal belongings’ and ‘travel for purposes other than business’ are high among women (62.9% and 33.9%, respectively).”¹³⁹ Single working women are free to accept promotions and office transfers, and enjoy a more

¹³⁸ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 12.

¹³⁹ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 21.

self-directed lifestyle by going on vacations, or splurging on expensive meals. The idealized female gender role, however, urges women to prioritize their role as mothers and provide quality, hands on childcare. As a married woman, family funds would be spent less on leisure and more on necessities. Single women are aware of the change in mentality that would be required of them and find the financial independence of singlehood to be a more economically stable option, encouraging them to stay single longer.

In the idealized gender role, women must quit their jobs and rely on their husbands' income, a deficit that contributes to the high cost of having children. Suzanne Hall Vogel and Steven Kent Vogel said, "Japanese society, especially before 1945, taught that a woman should always be financially dependent upon and obedient to a man—first her father, then her husband, and finally her son."¹⁴⁰ Today, however, more women are able to make a living on their own and without relying on a husband or child. In fact, financial autonomy combined with the fact that, as Fumie Kumagai said, "often the conditions of married life in Japan are not very attractive for able and independent women," which works to prevent marriage and therefore childbearing.¹⁴¹ The financial autonomy available to unmarried, childless, working women is shown to be a strong motivator to maintain that status, since singlehood offers more financial and personal independence.

National Economy as a Reason to Improve the Birth Rate

While the individual level of economic factors has a number of drawbacks to having children, the national level only sees the benefit to population growth. Significant research

¹⁴⁰ Vogel and Vogel, *The Japanese Family in Transition*, 114.

¹⁴¹ Kumagai, *Families in Japan*, 32.

has been conducted in the past decades that indicates a correlation between demography and economics, specifically the economic impact of an aging population. The “bubble” economy and its subsequent “burst” play an important role in Japan’s low birth rate. From the postwar period to the 1990s, Japan experienced significant economic growth. Thomas Cargill, an economist who studies Japanese financial policies, and Takayuki Sakamoto, a political science researcher, describe this era, stating:

In term of most economic and financial indicators, Japan’s performance outpaced many other industrial countries, especially Japan’s ability to achieve stable noninflationary growth in the face of a second set of oil price shocks in 1979 while at the same time adopting a policy of domestic and international financial liberalization.¹⁴²

Japan gained world recognition for its economic prosperity during the “bubble,” which reached its height in the early 1980s. They go on to say, “The period from 1980 to 1985 represents the high-water mark of the Japanese economy in terms of financial and central bank policy outcomes.”¹⁴³ The “bubble bursting” began in the early 1990s, when “asset prices collapsed, and subsequent events revealed a fundamentally weak financial system and set the stage for a long period of intense economic distress.”¹⁴⁴

The generation that experienced the sudden economic collapse of the 1990s developed a distrust in state financial institutions, from which grew a fear of future economic insecurity. Cargill and Sakamoto commented on the sentiments of the “bubble” economy generation, claiming that “the aging of the population and the growing costs of

¹⁴² Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 83.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 14.

health care and social security generated increasing uncertainty about the future.”¹⁴⁵ This fear that the future may not be financially secure continues to survive today. Many couples are hesitant to have children because they worry they may not be able to afford the expenses in the future. Consequently, this fear urges women to maintain their careers and, if they desire to marry someday, spend years saving for married life and motherhood. The birth rate has been in steady decline since the postwar period, with no significant change to determine that a prosperous economy equates to a high birth rate. However, fears of economic hardship have been proven to perpetuate the low birth rate and economic stability could also bring it to a level of population replenishment.

Stabilizing the birth rate is necessary, especially in light of the wide range of predictions for Japan’s population decline. Japan’s populace stood at 127.1 million in 2014.¹⁴⁶ Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare predicts that, without adequate intervention, the population will fall to 86.7 million by 2060, a decrease of about 32% of its current population.¹⁴⁷ As mentioned previously, a third of the population is projected to be of retirement age in 2050.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, a decline in the total population results in a reduction in the workforce population. Cargill and Sakamoto considered the effect of the aging population on Japan’s economy by discussing the ratio of the population over the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 46.

¹⁴⁶ World Bank, “Japan,” accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/japan>.

¹⁴⁷ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Vital Statistics: Population Projections for Japan*.

¹⁴⁸ Dekle, “The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population,” 71.

age of sixty-five to the workforce population, defined as ages twenty to sixty-four. They found that “in 2055 Japan, approximately 1.4 current workers will support one aged citizen, whereas, in 2000, 3.6 current workers supported one aged citizen.”¹⁴⁹ In the past, nearly four working individuals supported one non-working person. In contrast, future workers will need to support a retiree singlehandedly. This implies that the population in the workforce will be nearly equal to the population that is not working.

Such a weight on the declining workforce would burden economic growth and induce a rise in public debt. Some scholars found that “Japan’s rapidly aging population will result in a steady increase in national medical expenditure under the current public health insurance.”¹⁵⁰ Robert Dekle, whose research focused on international finance and economics in Japan and East Asia, discussed Japan’s aging population and the negative effect it could have on its’ waning economy, stating, “If the situation does not improve, the resulting huge public debt is expected to sharply increase Japanese interest rates, lower Japan’s international creditworthiness, and adversely affect the welfare of future generations.”¹⁵¹ With Japan’s role as a global economic leader, a weakened Japanese economy would affect worldwide finances, as was evident in the late 1990s when Japan’s “bubble” economy burst.

¹⁴⁹ Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 259.

¹⁵⁰ Ihori, et al., “Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan,” 30.

¹⁵¹ Dekle, “The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population,” 71.

Summary

Economic influences are one of the two external factors that affect a woman's decision of whether or not to have children, with institutional factors comprising the other half. Economic factors contribute both to the lack of and need for having children. The lack of personal financial resources pulls women away from choosing motherhood while national concerns over the threat of population and economic decline push for women to have more children. The individual cost of raising and educating children in Japan is significant, so many women postpone marriage to save the funds they will need for their potential children. The trend of deferring marriage to work towards economic achievement is embraced as a means to an end, even among those who seek to fulfill the idealized female gender role by becoming wives and mothers. Economic cost is one of the leading reported causes for delayed marriage and childbirth among Japanese individuals, with the economic hurdle growing greater after each child.¹⁵²

Once the decision to delay having children has been made, however, these women find themselves fulfilling an alternative gender role, which is further strengthened by the economic autonomy proffered by singlehood. In some cases, these women remain unmarried later in life because their dedication to achieving financial means has brought them past the age deemed appropriate for marriage. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these women are given derogatory labels without consideration for the economic causes of their situation.

¹⁵² National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 12; and Hori, "The Expenditure on Children in Japan," 1.

The generation of women that are in their forties and fifties today have lived through the various labels—“parasite singles” and “loser dogs”—at the height of their usages and entered adulthood during the economic decline referred to as the bursting of the economic “bubble.” Some scholars attribute the collapse of the economy in the 1990s to Japan’s fixation on past methods. This is supported by Cargill and Sakamoto, who said, “Japan’s ‘bubble’ economy in the second half of the 1980s and the almost fifteen years of economic distress in the 1990s and first few years of the new century can be traced to Japan’s unwillingness to depart from key elements of the old regime.”¹⁵³ Japan also has demonstrated a resistance to change on the social and economic issues that came to light with the “bubble” bursting, such as the financial hardships that deter women from having children and direct women towards a more self-sustainable lifestyle as a single.

The economic crisis of the 1990s also brought with it a fear of future economic insecurity that persists in Japanese society today.¹⁵⁴ This financial anxiety compounds the problem of the high cost of marriage and childrearing and adds to the systemic issue of the low birth rate. In order to prepare for married life, many women pursue careers initially in hopes of saving funds for marriage and lessening the financial blow of supporting a family on a single income. The economic autonomy of singlehood, however, results in many single women choosing to maintain their financial independence longer, either out of necessity or preference.

¹⁵³ Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 29.

¹⁵⁴ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 8.

Women who remain in the workforce are looked down upon by many conservatives for not following the ideal gender model, believing that their actions are the cause of the low birth rate. Yet, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has found that the advancement of women in the workforce would not only bring more revenue to the state fund, but would potentially boost the birth rate.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, women who remain in the workforce longer serve to generate the additional revenue that is needed to fund government programs, such as elder care, social security, and public health insurance, and in the long term could boost population growth.¹⁵⁶ As more of the population reaches the age of retirement and fewer children are born, the age gap widens, placing a greater weight on the workforce to provide for social programs. It is necessary to address the large government medical expenditure by increasing the workforce population through greater participation of women in order to generate revenue and thereby prevent a potentially high national debt that would grow in the coming decades.¹⁵⁷ For this reason, there is a strong national motivation to increase the birth rate in order to improve population growth and economic prospects.

Key implications of corporate and governmental influences on the lives of women will be examined further in the next chapter on external, institutional factors. The discussion will specifically focus on public policies aimed at alleviating some of the

¹⁵⁵ Shinzo Abe, “Shinzo Abe: Unleashing the Power of ‘Womonomics’,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2013, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303759604579091680931293404>.

¹⁵⁶ Dekle, “The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population”; and Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*, 205.

¹⁵⁷ Dekle, “The Deteriorating Fiscal Situation and an Aging Population”; and Ihori, et al., “Public Debt and Economic Growth in an Aging Japan.”

economic strain placed on parents in order to nurture more births, demonstrating how the various features defined in this thesis can interrelate. Intersection between the categories is to be anticipated because of the systemic conditions that cause the low birth rate. A woman's decision of whether or not to have a child in Japan is formed from a number of different influences from society. Because many of these influences are related to each other, there is bound to be some overlap between the categories.

V. EXTERNAL, INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE A WOMAN'S DECISION ABOUT CHILDBEARING

This thesis defines external, institutional factors as the effect of the national, prefectural, and local governments through public policies, and businesses through corporate environment on a woman's decision of whether or not to have children. With the predictions of population decline and economic strain in the near future, the government has worked to improve the lives of women by addressing some of the concerns they have about becoming mothers. These public policies are designed to encourage women to have more children, thereby boosting the national birth rate. Corporate culture has yet to join the governmental effort, though, and remains firmly fixed on the male breadwinner model, making it difficult for women to balance work and family, which contributes to a woman's struggle in her childbearing decision.¹⁵⁸

Japan's aging population places significant economic stress on society, specifically on the workforce, as examined in Chapter Four. Many researchers have found that this burden can be alleviated through greater promotion of women in the labor force. As considered in an earlier chapter, the responsibilities of women in marriage, specifically in childbearing and rearing, prevent women from pursuing a career, forcing them to choose between marriage and family, on the one hand, or a career, on the other hand. This chapter will argue that Japan's rigid corporate structure is responsible for preventing shared responsibility of childcare by both parents, contributes to gender inequality, and creates a

¹⁵⁸ Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows*, 6.

barrier to boosting the birth rate.¹⁵⁹ Corporate environment upholds the ideal gender model, as evident by the overall lack of female participation in the workforce, and the lack of female representation in managerial positions.¹⁶⁰ Many women are reluctant to marry and have children because they would be expected to leave their career, which they likely overcame many hardships to achieve. Although this corporate environment upholds the ideal gender model and advocates that women have children, this gendered division of labor has forced many women to decide between their careers or having children.

In an article published in *The Wall Street Journal*, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wrote, “In 1999, Kathy Matsui and her colleagues at Goldman Sachs first advocated that Japan could increase its gross domestic product by as much as 15% simply by tapping further its most underutilized resource—Japanese women.”¹⁶¹ The Japanese government responded to such findings by instituting a number of public policies aimed at aiding working mothers with “expanded daycare and nursing care services, implementation of flexible work arrangements, and more objective evaluation and compensation systems.”¹⁶² Lack of childcare facilities available in communities and gender discrimination that is prevalent in the corporate environment reinforce the ideal gender model, in that women are directed away from the workforce and from using community care facilities and are led towards the home, caring for their own children. Recent public efforts, however, have

¹⁵⁹ Boling, “Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan’s Low Fertility.”

¹⁶⁰ World Economic Forum, “Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – Japan.”

¹⁶¹ Abe, “Shinzo Abe: Unleashing the Power of ‘Womenomics’”; and Kathy Matsui, “Corporate Governance: Progress Report,” *Japan Strategy Flash, Goldman Sachs* (1999).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

worked to address the needs of mothers so that they are better able to remain in the workforce, but there has been an increasing trend of women postponing marriage in order to pursue a career.

In keeping with the pattern established by the previous chapters, challenges to boosting the birth rate will be presented first. In this case, the effect of corporate environment and the ways that this prevents women from having a family will be explored. This will then be followed by a discussion of the ways in which Japan is attempting to boost fertility, namely through public policies.

The Influence of Corporate Culture as a Barrier to Having Children

According to the World Economic Forum's 2015 Global Gender Gap Report, Japan ranked 101st overall out of 145 countries, representing Japan's poor performance of gender equality by international standards.¹⁶³ In comparison, the United States ranked 28th and South Korea ranked 115th as illustrated in Figure 5.1 below.¹⁶⁴ The report focused on four areas to determine a nation's level of gender equality: economic participation, education attainment, health, and political involvement. Japan ranked equally men and women equally in health and general education, but performed poorly in economic participation and politics. The overall female participation rate in the labor force was reportedly 65%, compared to 85% for males, meaning that women have a more difficult time finding and

¹⁶³ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – Japan."

¹⁶⁴ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – USA," accessed November 29, 2015, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/economies/#economy=USA>; and World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – Korea, Rep.," accessed November 29, 2015, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/economies/#economy=KOR>.

maintaining a job than men.¹⁶⁵ It also means that women face significantly more obstacles than men in receiving a promotion. In addition, only 9% of working women participate in the economy as legislators, senior officials, and managers, compared to the 91% male participation, earning Japan the 116th rank in that category. This suggests the widespread nature of gender discrimination in the workforce that exists in Japan and sheds more light on the struggle that women experience in deciding whether or not to have a child.

*Figure 5.1. International Comparison of Rankings
from the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report¹⁶⁶*

RANKINGS	JAPAN	SOUTH KOREA	UNITED STATES
OVERALL	101	115	28
ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND OPPORTUNITY	106	125	6
<i>LEGISLATORS, SENIOR OFFICIALS, AND MANAGERS</i>	116	113	12
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	84	102	40
<i>LITERACY RATE</i>	1	1	1
HEALTH AND SURVIVAL	42	79	64
<i>HEALTHY LIFE EXPECTANCY</i>	1	1	79
POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT	104	104	72
<i>WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT</i>	125	94	81

Patricia Boling narrowed the idea of gender discrimination in Japan’s workforce down to the very definition of the “ideal worker” in Japan. She claimed:

Japanese workers strongly identify with their companies, and Japanese companies expect their workers to devote themselves to the company and the job without question, including working overtime, accepting transfers (even when it means living away from their families sometimes even for

¹⁶⁵ World Economic Forum, “Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – Japan.”

¹⁶⁶ World Economic Forum, “Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – Japan;” World Economic Forum, “Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – Korea, Rep.,” and World Economic Forum “Global Gender Gap Report 2015 - USA.”

months or years at a time), going out drinking several times a week, playing on a company team, going on company outings, and the like.¹⁶⁷

The time-consuming and work intensive nature of the ideal worker leaves little time for a family, whether the worker is male or female. Due to the expectation of women to become mothers, the ideal employee, therefore, implies that the worker is male, which is supported by the higher percentage of male participation and promotion in the workforce. Boling found that the contemporary Japanese corporate environment “reinforces unjust and one-sided arrangements in which women do virtually all the childrearing and housework and take less interesting, less well-rewarded positions in the workforce because those are the only ones compatible with their childcare responsibilities.”¹⁶⁸

In 2010, a survey conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research reported that the majority of wives did not support the statement “husbands should work and wives should stay home.”¹⁶⁹ This shows a desire from women for greater gender equality in the home and workplace. Many women do have professional aspirations and strive to be considered valuable employees, but since their employers hold them to the ideal gender model as mothers, they face difficulties in advancing their careers. When making the decision of whether or not to have a child, women must consider the effect that motherhood will have on their careers and other parts of their lives. The rigid corporate structure inhibits gender equality and contributes to the declining birth rate.

¹⁶⁷ Boling, “Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan’s Low Fertility,” 316.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 317.

¹⁶⁹ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 24.

The lower overall workforce participation rate by women can be directly linked to the ideal gender model. Many researchers, like anthropologist Lynne Nakano, have noted that the impact of employment on a person's decision about childbearing is very different for men and women. In her research, Nakano states, "For men, both marriage and singlehood require continuous commitment to work. For women, in contrast, marriage generally involves a commitment to caring for children and husband while singlehood brings continuous full-time employment."¹⁷⁰ Unlike men, women are conversely less represented in the workforce overall, with a noticeable decline in participation in their twenties and thirties, usually referred to as the M-curve.¹⁷¹ Scholars have attributed this dip in participation to the cultural norm of women leaving the workforce when they marry in order to become housewives and mothers.

Sawa Kurotani commented on the support of the idealized gender role in corporate environment:

Despite the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), introduced in 1986, which officially opened the doors to career-track positions for women in the corporate world, the society continues to pressure married women to quit their jobs when they have children.¹⁷²

During the postwar period, Japan developed a two-track employment system that consisted of a managerial or career track and an office staff track. The managerial track included chances for promotions, benefits and other opportunities. The office staff track consisted

¹⁷⁰ Nakano, "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan," 164.

¹⁷¹ Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 92; and Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 163.

¹⁷² Sawa Kurotani, "Working Women of the Bubble Generation," in *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*, eds. Satsuki Kawano, Glenda Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 81.

of part-time, temporary and contract workers. The office staff track was typically pursued by women, due to the flexibility those positions offered, which was more compatible with the demands of motherhood. Louis Hayes, a political science scholar who conducted research in various countries in Asia, including Japan, described the limited prospects that these positions offered, stating, “Their temporary or part-time status means that women do not receive fringe benefits, training opportunities, family and housing allowances, and other income supplements accorded to permanent workers.”¹⁷³ This is designed to encourage women’s reliance on their husband’s income.

Although the two-track employment system was officially disbanded when the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOC) was first drafted, remnants of the old ways remain. Before the EEOC, gender discrimination was an established, systematic part of the corporate process. Today, peer pressure to conform to the idealized gender roles for men and women is utilized, instead. Through the sponsorship of the idealized gender roles in corporate environment, an individual’s position in a company will be largely determined based on gender. Today, companies continue to assume that women will marry and leave the workforce so they typically hire women in part-time or temporary contracts, positions that offer little incentive to remain. One scholar remarks:

When women’s expectations are not fulfilled by the corporation, they may opt to quit. Young women start a career as *sōgōshoku* [managerial track] with high expectations, and when the company views them as unfit for the

¹⁷³ Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*, 153.

corporate world and places them in a mezzanine position or clerical position, women feel discriminated against.¹⁷⁴

The lack of professional prospects in this capacity are added incentive for women to leave the workforce and become housewives. Thus, unmarried women must choose to commit to the managerial track and postpone marriage and family, or to give up their careers in order to have a family.

The two-track system is revealing of gender discrimination against men, as well. Because of the idealized gender role, it is more socially acceptable for women to limit the amount of time that they work in an office, since they are assumed to prioritize their role as caregivers first.¹⁷⁵ Men, however, are compelled to conform to their idealized gender role by pursuing the managerial track, dedicating their time to the company rather than to their families.¹⁷⁶ This prevents more equal parting of household responsibilities and the lack of availability from her partner may factor into a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child.

The disparity in wages earned between the genders is also indicative of gender inequality in the Japanese corporate structure. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe acknowledged that "Japanese women earn, on average, 30.2% less than men (compared with 20.1% in the U.S. and just 0.2% in the Philippines) [in 2013]."¹⁷⁷ The discrepancy in wages could be

¹⁷⁴ Yoko Kawashima, "The Labor Market, Corporate Organization, Corporate Culture, and Gender in Japan," in *Gender and Japanese History, Vol. 2*, eds. Wakita Haruko, Anne Bouchy, and Ueno Chizuko (Osaka: Osaka University Press, 1999), 530.

¹⁷⁵ Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 60.

¹⁷⁶ Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility," 316.

¹⁷⁷ Abe, "Shinzo Abe: Unleashing the Power of 'Womenomics'."

explained by corporate reinforced gender expectations. The salary earned by men is assumed to be the sole income for his family, while the salary earned by women is considered supplementary income, if she is married, or only for her, if she is single. Lower wages for women may be designed to gear women towards marriage but this is, in fact, contributing to the prevalence of delayed marriage. Many couples simply cannot afford to get married and raise a child. Thus, corporate environment places women in an either-or situation, forcing them to choose between pursuing a career or having a family, and women are increasingly choosing to overcome the obstacles in the workplace to pursue a career.¹⁷⁸

The two-track system is not the only corporate practice that interferes with women's participation in the workforce. Louis Hayes commented on the outright gender discrimination that is prevalent during the promotion process in many Japanese companies, stating, "Less than 30 percent of Japanese companies will even consider hiring a woman for a managerial or technical position. In the remaining 70 percent of companies, most jobs open to women are as assembly-line workers, secretaries, and clerks."¹⁷⁹ Even women who are committed to their career are not given the full extent of opportunities available to their male counterparts.

This fact is also stated by Thomas Cargill and Takayuki Sakamoto:

The common belief was that women who wanted to become or remain core permanent workers more or less had to give up on having family and children. Japanese companies operated on the assumption that female workers quit work when they got married. In such a male-dominated corporate environment, even women who gave up marriage and family had

¹⁷⁸ Kumagai, *Families in Japan*, 144; Kingston, *Contemporary Japan: History, Politics, and Social Change Since the 1980s*, 45; and Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class*, 271.

¹⁷⁹ Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*, 153.

difficulty staying in their companies and be considered indispensable workers.¹⁸⁰

The apparent intention of this corporate environment is to reinforce the idealized female gender role of “good wives and wise mothers.” More often, however, women are choosing to remain in the workforce longer, delaying marriage and motherhood instead. Again, there is a dichotomy between the intent and reality that contributes to a woman’s struggle in deciding whether or not to have a child. It is an interesting fact that as companies attempt to reinforce the ideal gender model, which should boost the birth rate in theory, they are in fact alienating the ideal by making it harder to achieve. This is supported by the fact that the percentage of singles is on the rise, indicating that women are having a harder time finding partners and are dedicating themselves more to their companies for their livelihood.¹⁸¹ The expectation of women to conform to the idealized gender role, thereby excluding them from the workforce, is an indication that the contemporary Japanese corporate environment is based on an outdated structural model and negatively affects the low birth rate. Government and social intervention is needed to break the cycle, which can be accomplished via public policies and a change in social mentality.

Government Policies Aimed at Promoting Childbirth

In 2013, as part of his economic reform, Prime Minister Abe responded to the research that correlated the advancement of women in the workplace with an improvement in both the economy and birth rate by instituting a number of governmental changes. Only

¹⁸⁰ Cargill, and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 261.

¹⁸¹ Nakano, “Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan,” 164.

recently have pro-fertility policies looked at gender equality in the workplace, however.¹⁸² Nonetheless, the policies address issues in other areas of society and have since been revised to increase the number of nurseries available, provide greater financial support to parents, and improve government-sponsored eldercare programs.

Due to the lack of nurseries available in urban settings, there is a long waitlist for families who are trying to enroll their children. An article from *Bloomberg Business* reported, “There were 23,167 children on waiting lists [as of April 1, 2015], up almost 8 percent from the previous year.”¹⁸³ The result of this waitlist is that mothers often must make the decision to leave their jobs and stay home to take care of their child until they are accepted to a nursery, though this process can take years due to the long waitlist. Leonard Schoppa, a researcher on Japan’s political system, stated, “The limited supply of childcare and eldercare services, and the complete absence of family leave, pushed many women to quit their jobs when they had children or when a family member needed care.”¹⁸⁴

Some parents also choose to not have more than one child because of the difficulties they faced trying to enroll in a nursery with their first child. The government has sought to rectify this issue through social reform with the increased production of child care facilities,

¹⁸² Mizuho Aoki, “Diet Passes Bill Aimed as Boosting Women in the Workplace,” *Japan Times*, August 28, 2015, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/08/28/national/politics-diplomacy/diet-passes-bill-aimed-boosting-women-workplace/#.VoQuCFIrdxV>.

¹⁸³ Isabel Reynolds, “Lack of Childcare is Hurting Japanese Push to Put More Women to Work,” *Bloomberg Business*, September 30, 2015, accessed December 11, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-09-30/japan-s-childcare-backlog-hampers-abe-push-to-put-women-to-work>.

¹⁸⁴ Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 11.

particularly in urban areas where the demand is higher, and with the removal of nursery fees for multiple children from the same family. The same article from *Bloomberg Business* claimed that “there were 2.47 million daycare places available for pre-school-age children [as of April 1, 2015], up by about 140,000 from the previous year.”¹⁸⁵ The government has attempted to address the public concern for limited daycare facilities, but has been unable to accommodate the demand. Thus, availability of nurseries may factor into a woman’s decision of whether or not to have a child.

Another government policy is the *jidō teate*, or Child Allowance System.¹⁸⁶ In 2012, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare released a report with a number of updated public policies that would be put in place until the 2016 fiscal year, which included revisions to the Child Allowance System. This act falls in the category of “family cash benefits,” which “includes child allowances for families with young children, designed to help them offset the added costs and lost wages associated with child rearing, and additional means-tested payments to poor families with children.”¹⁸⁷ As shown in the previous chapter, the economic cost for raising children is a strong deterrent to having children. Thus, it is important to note the government’s efforts to combat economic challenges. In the Child Allowance program, families with children younger than three years old receive ¥15,000 each month (about \$122 in 2015). After a child turns three years

¹⁸⁵ Reynolds, “Lack of Childcare is Hurting Japanese Push to Put More Women to Work.”

¹⁸⁶ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Policy System of Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [Fundamental Goals, Grand Measure Goals, and Measure Goals], 2012 – 2016* (2012), 164.

¹⁸⁷ Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 45-46.

old, families receive ¥10,000 (about \$81 in 2015) until the child graduates from junior high school.¹⁸⁸ Unfortunately, as Schoppa points out, “though this program began with great fanfare in 1973, by the 1990s the value of this source of support had eroded to the point where it had little impact on the average family’s finances.”¹⁸⁹ Although the Child Allowance System provides some monetary relief for parents, it is not enough to impact the significant cost of childrearing in Japan and continues to be a concern for women in their decision of whether or not to have a child.

Another public policy focuses on relieving the burden of eldercare placed on women. As stated in the chapter on internal, individual factors, idealized gender roles and familial expectations mandate that women take care of their husband’s parents. Familial responsibilities have shifted so that women are often the desired care provider for their own parents, as well. Depending on the family, a woman may be held accountable in caring for both sets of parents.¹⁹⁰ Some women are overburdened with the obligation of caring for their aging parents or in-laws that they cannot have children due to the time and financial demands of caring for their elderly relatives.¹⁹¹ Taking this matter into consideration, the government has implemented a policy that builds more eldercare facilities. It is becoming more socially acceptable to utilize these facilities, especially when a parent is quite elderly

¹⁸⁸ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Policy System*, 164.

¹⁸⁹ Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 179.

¹⁹⁰ Traphagan, “Contesting Coresidence: Women, In-laws, and Health Care in Rural Japan,” 203-228.

¹⁹¹ Jenike, “Parent Care and Shifting Family Obligations in Urban Japan.”

or suffers from a disease, such as Alzheimer's.¹⁹² Even so, the issue of time and energy constraints on a woman who is already caring for elderly relatives may factor into her childbearing decision.

Despite their aim at improving the birth rate, previous public policies have had little effect on population growth. Often, these policies were modelled after policies that were developed and proven effective in other nations. Recent research shows, though, that these policies have not been successful in Japan, implying an alternative cause for the low birth rate rather than poor policy-making.¹⁹³ While the improvement of childcare and eldercare services acknowledges and alleviates the caregiving burden placed on women, society has turned to government-funded programs, rather than looking to male relatives to care for their families. The policies may be ineffective because they seek to reinforce the ideal gender model, and do not address gender inequality in the corporate structure. Additionally, the financial benefits are likely not significant enough to motivate women who are of lower socioeconomic status to have a child. Therefore, these policies may only improve conditions for women who are already likely to have children (i.e. married and in good socioeconomic standing).

Summary

This chapter has focused on external, institutional factors, specifically the ways in which public policies and corporate environment impact a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child. These two external examples also perpetuate the ideal female gender

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*; and Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility."

model of women as mothers. Though, this effort to reinforce the idealized gender role also highlights a number of impediments that women face when trying to achieve a balance between their professional and personal lives, such as the obstacles that women face as employees. Due to the systemic nature of Japan's low birth rate, there are a number of ways in which the four categories are interconnected, like public policies that aim to alleviate the economic burden of childrearing.

Japan ranks in the bottom third of global gender equality reports, signifying systemic gender inequality, especially in politics and business.¹⁹⁴ Corporate environment idealizes men as employees and women as mothers, evident by the wage discrepancy between men and women, the lack of female representation at higher management positions, and the overall lesser percentage of female participation in the workforce.¹⁹⁵ Scholars have commented on this systemic gender inequality, stating, "Japanese society will be forced to become a friendlier place for women, because of the declining population and the need to increase fertility rates, population, and the workforce."¹⁹⁶ Current corporate environment places women in an either-or situation in which they are denied a balance between full-time employment and having a family, significantly impacting their decision of whether or not to have children. The contemporary Japanese corporate environment supports the expectation of women to conform to the ideal gender model, thereby excluding

¹⁹⁴ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2015 – Japan."

¹⁹⁵ Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility"; Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, 92; Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 163; and Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics*, 153.

¹⁹⁶ Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 259.

them from the workforce. This suggests that the current corporate environment is based on an outdated structural model and negatively affects the low birth rate.

The Japanese government has responded to public concern for the low birth rate and has intervened through the development of a number of pro-fertility public policies. The development of more childcare and eldercare facilities, increased capacity for existing facilities, and greater economic support for parents have been utilized to encourage couples to have more children. While these policies seek to alleviate the encumbrance of care on women, they fortify the idealized gender role for women by excluding men from such caregiving roles. The government has also been unable to adequately deal with gender inequality in the corporate environment, as well, as stated by Susan Holloway:

The government has had less success, however, in compelling employers to eliminate sexist employment practices that prevent women from staying in the labor force after having a child; nor has there been much progress in creating a culture of work that doesn't preclude the worker's participation in family life.¹⁹⁷

The majority of pro-fertility public policies target working mothers and do not focus on single women or men. However, in early 2015, a revision to the child promotion policy included goals for: (a) improved matchmaking services for singles, such as those advertised in Figure 5.2 below, (b) male involvement in childcare by measuring paternity leave and average time spent with families, and (c) additional improvements to nurseries

¹⁹⁷ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 5; Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*; and R. L. Miller, "The Quiet Revolution: Japanese Women Working around the Law," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 26 (2003): 163-215.

by allowing families with three or more children to have priority access to nurseries and day cares.¹⁹⁸

Figure 5.2. “Kekkon dekinai hito wo zero ni [The people who cannot get married to zero]” Matchmaking Advertisement in Tokyo, 2015. Photo courtesy of the author.



Perhaps the most recent revision will yield greater results at improving population growth, considering it makes a stronger effort than previous attempts to foster marriage and father involvement in childrearing. Along with the improved policies, a government campaign showing men as fathers and caregivers in a positive way could help to change gender views such that a caregiving father would be socially acceptable and desirable, especially among companies. This shift from the ideal gender model is the key to improving gender equality and the birth rate.

¹⁹⁸ Japan Times, “Cabinet Seeks to Raise Percentage of Men Taking Paternity Leave to 80% by 2020,” March 20, 2015, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/03/20/national/cabinet-seeks-to-raise-percentage-of-men-taking-paternity-leave-to-80-by-2020/#.VoQtdVirdxX>.

VI. CONCLUSION

Aiko's Story

Susan Holloway, the Child Development and Education scholar who researched Japanese mothers, created an imaginary situation to “envision how conditions in contemporary Japanese society affect young women contemplating marriage and family life,” which she describes as thus:

An imaginary young college student named Aiko falls into casual conversation with Chihiro, the frustrated mother in our study. When Aiko mentions that she is studying consumer sciences at a nearby university, Chihiro begins to describe her former exciting career as a professional in the field of industrial design. She goes on to chronicle her subsequent departure from the workplace when it became apparent how difficult it would be to manage the job and perform all her household duties with little help from her husband. She describes her persistent sense of failure as a mother, her feeling of estrangement from her husband, and her boredom at her part-time job.¹⁹⁹

By the end of the conversation, Aiko has decided to “postpone the inevitable choice [between marriage and career] by waiting as long as possible to give in to her boyfriend’s desire to get married.”²⁰⁰

The narrative fairly accurately describes the interconnection and impact of the various factors discussed in this thesis. Although Holloway does not mention the fact that the ideal gender model is reiterated to Aiko through internal, public factors like mass media, the other factors are present in this short story. Internal, individual factors are present in that Aiko now has a personal relationship with the frustrated mother Chihiro, who is unconsciously encouraging Aiko to forgo the ideal gender model. External, economic

¹⁹⁹ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 213.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

factors are implied in that Chihiro has taken on a part-time job presumably for the additional income, since it is not for her enjoyment. And finally, external, institutional factors are present in the struggle that Chihiro experienced in trying to balance work and family. This story drawn up by Holloway is a great example of the many influences on a woman's decision of whether or not to have a child and the systemic nature of Japan's low birth rate.

This thesis has utilized the platform of the low birth rate to discuss the gap between the ideal gender model of women as mothers and alternative gender roles, which is a strong cause for the internal-external struggle that women experience as they decide whether or not to have children. Although specific examples were provided in each chapter, there is not any single element responsible for the low birth rate. As seen in Aiko's story, it is the culmination of Chihiro's conversation that influences Aiko's decision to delay marriage, rather than a single detail. Furthermore, I explored some of the ways that increased reinforcement of the ideals does not improve the birth rate, but in fact further alienates women from becoming mothers. Public discourse acknowledges the issue as a national concern in terms of its widespread nature, but points the finger at women as the cause. Through the examination of a number of different aspects of Japanese society, this thesis argued that the low birth rate is an outcome from the systemic problem that occurs when the factors discussed in this paper occur simultaneously in society.

Internal Factors

The ideal gender model and the effect of personal relationships are examples of internal, individual factors that influence a woman's decision about childbearing. What if Aiko's boyfriend was more progressive or family-minded and was willing to actively help

raise their family in equal partnership? Would the couple then move forward with getting married and starting a family? The research from this thesis indicates that a society that encourages couples to lessen the gendered division of labor would be more likely to achieve a sustainable birth rate.

Redefining the ideal female gender model in Japan would be no easy task. According to Cargill and Sakamoto, “Japan traditionally has been a conservative society in terms of gender equality, with a male-breadwinner model. Husbands were expected to provide for their family and wives served as homemakers taking care of the children.”²⁰¹ While the term “good wife, wise mother” is not used so frequently to describe Japanese women today, the conservative notion remains.²⁰² The remnants of this conservative belief can be seen in the sentiments of some politicians and media figures, who blame women for the population decline and criticize them for not fulfilling the female gender ideal by labeling them “loser dogs,” and “parasite singles.”²⁰³

The ideal gender model emphasizes the importance that women should place on being a caregiver, not only to their husbands and children, but parents, as well. Because of this, a woman’s personal relationships may be a contributing factor in her decision about childbearing that is counteracting the intense pressure to conform to the ideal gender model. The burden of caregiving to husband, parents, in-laws, and potential children that is expected of women is great enough to discourage women from having children, and in

²⁰¹ Cargill and Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, 44.

²⁰² Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows*, 6.

²⁰³ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 123.

some cases from getting married in the first place, as seen in the imaginary scenario with Chihiro and Aiko.²⁰⁴

As more women choose not to or are unable to fulfill the idealized gender role, women in popular media are being represented in alternative roles at higher rates. More often, female characters are shown as single, in their thirties, and focusing on their careers as seen in *Last Cinderella* and *Fear and Trembling*, demonstrating the increasing frequency of these lifestyles.²⁰⁵ These alternative characters, and the women who lead similar lives in the real world, are still subject to criticism and are encouraged to seek the protection of motherhood to avoid the public reproach.²⁰⁶

External Factors

Women are not always choosing to forgo the idealized gender role of wife and mother, but sometimes have that choice made for them. The hurdles to achieving marriage and motherhood sometimes prove too great to overcome, leading women away from the idealized female gender role, as shown in Aiko's story. Aiko saw the struggles that Chihiro went through in balancing work and family, with Chihiro's career eventually losing out, and Aiko decided to postpone marriage. Rather than blame women for the low birth rate, as some critics do, Holloway suggests that "attempts to address the issue of the declining birth rate need to consider a complicated set of issues, some structural and some related to

²⁰⁴ Boling, "Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan's Low Fertility."

²⁰⁵ Nakano, *Last Cinderella*; Amélie Nothomb, *Fear and Trembling*; and Amélie Nothomb, Johann Sebastian Bach, Thierry Derocles, Yves Angelo, Gen Shimaoka, et al, *Stupeur et tremblements (Fear and Trembling)* (United States: Home Vision Entertainment, 2005).

²⁰⁶ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*.

discourses about work and parenting.”²⁰⁷ The result of this systemic issue is that both men and women are getting married at older ages, if at all. As stated in previous chapters, delayed marriage is a contributing feature to the declined birth rate.²⁰⁸

Economic and institutional influences are among the most reported reasons for later or unrealized marriage and children. While improving the status of both national and personal economies, women who remain in the workforce are the subject of criticism for not having children, despite the conditions that place women in an either-or situation in choosing between work and family.²⁰⁹ Conversely, women who leave the workforce to have children are upholding the ideal gender model by becoming mothers but are also aware of the penalty incurred to their personal economy, as seen in Chihiro’s situation from the imaginary scenario. Not only is the direct cost of raising children significant, but the loss of potential income caused when mothers leave the workforce must also be taken into account. The decision to choose between a personal life and professional pursuits, and the lack of compatibility between the two, contributes to the lack of population growth and has built the fork in the road of women’s lives between the idealized and alternative female gender roles.

This course of life expectation of choosing between work and family for today’s generation of young women in Japan is adequately summarized by Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni:

²⁰⁷ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 214.

²⁰⁸ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 4; and National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 2.

²⁰⁹ Kumagai, *Families in Japan*, 144; Kingston, *Contemporary Japan: History, Politics, and Social Change Since the 1980s*, 45; and Vogel, *Japan’s New Middle Class*, 271.

Growing up in the midst of the economic bubble, they nevertheless developed a hedonistic lifestyle and were known as the *Hanako* tribe [literally, “flower children,” and is another term that denotes the perceived irresponsibility of this group]. Then again, as we saw, upon marriage these same women readily accepted the more frugal lifestyle of their model-housewife mothers as they followed the standard life plan working as OL [Office Ladies] and quitting their jobs upon marriage.²¹⁰

Current corporate environment limits a person’s involvement in their family life, driving the division of labor between parents and promoting idealized gender roles for both men and women.²¹¹ Women are excluded from the labor force and men are excluded from a life with their families, which was also seen in Holloway’s story of the frustrated mother Chihiro. A large portion of Chihiro’s frustration stemmed from this division of labor. If corporate environment is a reflection of the larger condition of women, addressing gender inequality will aid in equalizing the status of men and women in Japan at home and in the office. Tending to this issue will allow for both a growth in the economy through more active participation by women in the workforce, and a growth in the population through more active participation of men in childrearing. Although the Japanese government has acknowledged that childbirth is a matter of individual choice, government and corporations have the greatest influence on the lives of the Japanese citizens, and therefore should be the leaders of this change. This change should not focus on improving population, but on removing impediments that adversely influence its citizens’ lives.

To its credit, the Japanese government has worked to improve the lives of women in the home and in the office.²¹² However, despite the government’s effort to provide

²¹⁰ Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan*, 135.

²¹¹ Boling, “Demography, Culture, and Policy: Understanding Japan’s Low Fertility.”

²¹² Abe, “Shinzo Abe: Unleashing the Power of ‘Womenomics’.”

economic support for parents of young children and address other concerns that prevent population growth, the government has been unable to adequately deal with gender equality in the corporate world.²¹³ Holloway commented that persistent gender discrimination against women in the workplace has worked to motivate women “to struggle harder at work, thus delaying marriage and resulting in declining birth rates.”²¹⁴ It is not a matter of aiding working mothers, but rather restructuring corporate design to become more gender neutral, allowing mothers and fathers to take an equally active role at home and in the office.

Final Remarks

Japan will need to blur the line dividing gender roles in order to boost marriage rates, improve the birth rate, and curb the decline in Japan’s total population that is foreseen in the coming decades. The dichotomy between the male and female idealized gender roles has long been socially acceptable and is reinforced through corporate environment and social practices. The results of the contrasting roles are evident in the fact that “couples are meeting one another at older ages, the length of courtship has lengthened, and the trend of later marriage has further strengthened.”²¹⁵ The prevalence of delayed marriage has taken a toll on the national birth rate, and shows that men are having as difficult a time of finding a partner and having children as women.

Further research is needed on the views of both men and women and what they view as social and structural obstructions to leading a fulfilling life. This thesis focused on

²¹³ Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, 5.

²¹⁴ Nakano, “Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan,” 167.

²¹⁵ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Marriage Process and Fertility of Japanese Married Couples*, 2.

the impact of a gendered society on women and their decision about childbearing. Further research could potentially prove that the gendered nature of society in Japan influences men's decision of whether or not to have children in equal but different ways. Recently, the Japanese government outlined a policy that encourages male participation in the household, which this thesis indicates is a step in the right direction.

It is important to view the low birth rate as a systemic issue and as the responsibility of society as a whole. If Japan continues to firmly uphold the ideal gender model, the birth rate will not improve, and all of the warnings from scholars of economic debt and predictions of population decline will likely come true. The decline in the birth rate should not be the sole responsibility of women, but should be looked at as a national concern with a national solution. Unless Japan is able to enact some kind of social change that allows more similarities between the roles of men and women, it is unlikely that there will be an improvement to the birth rate. Thus, Japan must bridge the gap between gender ideals and equalize the status of men and women in order to achieve an improvement in the birth rate. In order to achieve this equilibrium, Japan must institute strong pro-fertility public policies and encourage a change in social mentality that is more accepting of working mothers and caregiving fathers. In time, greater gender equality can be achieved, which will inevitably stabilize the birth rate.

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