

# Maternity and Work: The Impossible Challenge of Japanese Women

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## ABSTRACT

*Japan's declining birth rate reached a record low in 2005 with a fertility rate of 1.26 births. This study explores the principal factors behind Japanese women's waning desire to have children: the obligation of marriage; the impact of higher education on women; and a grueling job market making conciliation of career and family extremely difficult. Based on interviews with Japanese women (with and without children), this research verified the influence of marriage, education and the job market on their child-bearing rate. Results indicate that the desire to have children does not seem to be an underlying factor in the birth rate. Many women felt that giving up on motherhood was not a choice but rather an inevitable outcome of the reality of life in Japan.*

**KEYWORDS:** Child desire; Child-bearing rate; Fertility rate; Japan; Women; Work-life balance

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE desire to have children is universal across all societies, even if this desire is not shared by all individuals. Yet, most industrialized OEDC countries (members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) face a declining birth rate. For some women, the issue of whether to have children does not even arise. They have always known that they would want a child as soon as certain conditions were met. They do not anticipate a life without children, whom they view as a source of personal fulfillment. They do not hesitate to make the necessary changes to adapt to the arrival of a newborn, regardless of whether this event affects their personal life or their career. For others, however, the issue represents an internal debate. While they recognize that the birth of a child is certainly a wonderful event, some women wonder whether they really want to have children; to change a life they know and appreciate for a new and unknown reality. They are also keenly aware of the pressure on mothers concerning the behavior, welfare and education of their baby.

Japanese women are currently grappling with these pressures. They either do not marry and have no children, or they marry at a later age, thus limiting the possibility of having more than one child. The rate of unmarried women in the traditional marriage age

bracket (the rate at which the majority of women enter into matrimony), namely those aged 25-29 years, was 59% in 2007 compared to only 21% in 1970. The rate of unmarried Japanese men between the ages of 30 and 34 also increased from 14% in 1970 to 47% in 2007 (Bumpass, Rindfuss, Choe, & Tsuya, 2009, p. 218). Researchers believe that many of these women will marry during their thirties, but without necessarily becoming a mother. Thus, over one third of Japanese women will not have a child, according to these estimates (Retherford, 2005, p. 4).

Did marriage and children become less attractive for the Japanese, thereby inhibiting the desire to have one? Some experts readily identify the most educated women as the most likely to reject the roles of wife and mother (Strom & Strom, 2009; Nagase, 2006, p. 39). This issue generated our interest in exploring the situation directly with Japanese women who have completed higher education. Our study therefore attempted to answer the following question: **What are the main factors that inhibit the desire of Japanese women to have children?**

## RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

In order to understand why some Japanese women choose to not have children and what may be preventing them from doing so, we formulated two hypotheses.

The first hypothesis suggests that the Japanese birth rate is a result of three aspects of Japanese society that act as fairly significant obstacles to child bearing: marriage, education, and the labour market. This hypothesis was mainly based on the theory of intergenerational wealth flows, which means that in a capitalist mode of production, the cost of a child tends to rise as a result of the costs of education (Caldwell, 2004, p. 571). Japan is a society in which children require a large financial investment to make them children of "high quality" (better education and good health). According to Ogawa, this would be a plausible cause of declining birth rate (Ogawa, Mason, Chawla, Matsukura, & Tung, 2009, p. 304). Our second hypothesis most directly affects the desire to have children: women who do not have children simply do not want to have any. Perhaps some Japanese women choose a career over a child, thinking that having both would be too difficult. These two hypotheses and our findings will be further discussed below.

To answer our research question, we began with a review of the scientific literature on the subject that we will present at the beginning of the following sections. We gathered many publications about this particular subject, as the declining birth rate is a major concern in Japan. However, we wanted to go further than simply examining the statistics. Most of the research carried out by the Japanese represents quantitative studies or qualitative studies based on surveys, because conducting interviews is not a common practice. To explore new explanations to our documentary research, we added structured interviews with Japanese women to our methodology. At first, we wanted to do semi-structured interviews, but we were not enough fluent in Japanese to realize this kind of interviews. Instead, we developed an interview format in which the following themes were explored: perceptions of the cost of a child; employment opportunities before and after the arrival of a newborn; and work-family balance. Two versions of the interview were created: one for women with children and another for women without children. We attempted to find out whether the desire to have children had been present with mothers from the beginning and whether women without children had ever experienced the desire to have one. We then tried to dig further and asked mothers if they had encountered difficulties related to the aspects under study and how they were able to manage after having their children. Our sampling took into account the following criteria: being a Japanese woman; living in Japan and having obtained a university degree, which requires greater

investment in terms of both time and money. We selected women aged 30 to 45, because this age range is higher than the average age of Japanese women giving birth to their first child, which was 28.9 in 2004 (OECD, 2007, p. 35).

After conducting seventeen structured interviews, we believed we had reached a point where we were getting saturated results. All the women interviewed lived in the Kansai, a region lies in the southern-central main island of Japan. It is the second most populated region in Japan (after Tokyo area), as it included the cities of Kyoto and Osaka. Our respondents lived mainly in the city of Kyoto or the neighboring prefecture (Shiga-ken). One of the respondents lived in the Kobe area (Hyogo-ken). The average age was 37 years. Approximately half of the sample (nine women) had children, while the other half (eight women) did not. The interview was conducted in Japanese. We recruited the Japanese women through public postings on bulletin boards in cultural exchange centres for Japanese citizens and foreigners. The interview was transcribed by a Japanese speaking native. We then translated the transcription, which was verified by a professional translator. To ensure confidentiality, the respondents were all given Japanese flower names. An abbreviation follows each name: "CL" for "childless" and "MT" for "mother".

## MARRIAGE

The Japanese birth rate began to drop shortly after World War II, following the baby boom that lasted only three years in Japan, or from 1947 to 1949. A second baby boom occurred between 1971 and 1974, which equalled the rate of population replacement (2.14). After the first baby boom (1947-1949), in just ten years, the birth rate in Japan fell by more than half, from 4.54 children per woman to 2.04 in 1957 (Ogawa, Kondo, & Matsukura, 2005, p. 208). After 1973, demographers have called the second decline in the birth rate the second demographic transition in Japan (Ogawa, Kondo, & Matsukura, 2005, p. 209). In 1989, the media garnered significant public attention to the issue by calling it the "Shock 1.57" (Jolivet, 1993, p. 7).

The declining birth rate closely followed the declining number of marriages, even today, since the number of births outside marriage is almost nonexistent in Japan. The average age at marriage also continues to rise, making Japan one of the countries in which marriage occurs the latest in the world. Between 1975 and 2009, the average age at marriage for men rose from 27.0 to 30.4. A similar increase was observed for

women, for whom the average age at marriage was up from 24.7 to 28.6. In addition, the number of single people continues to increase, particularly men. Among those aged 54 and older, 12.6% had never married in 2000 (compared to only 2.1% in 1975). Women are in the same situation: at age 54, 5.8% are still single, a slight increase from the 4.3% rate in 1975 (Ogawa, Retherford, & Matsukura, 2006, p. 26). This trend does not seem to be reversing since, according to a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, young women are more likely than men to appreciate their status as single, with some even claiming that they do not expect to ever marry or have children (White, 2002, p. 39).

Marriage remains the key to child bearing, since the fertility rate is much higher among married women. The statistics confirm the importance of child-bearing in marriage. When we observe the figures for married couples, we note that women aged 15 to 49 have a fertility rate of 2.2 children per woman (White, 2002, p. 39). This number is higher than the population replacement rate, usually set at 2.1 children per woman, and significantly higher than the average fertility rate of 1.42 children in 2014 (The Japan Times, 2015).

However, the average age at marriage is increasing, which is undoubtedly the greatest risk to the fertility rate, since very few children are born outside marriage in Japan. The proportion of children born outside marriage was estimated at 2% of all births in 2007 (OECD, 2014).

Even more threatening is the increasing number of unmarried Japanese: it has tripled between 1970 and 2005. Researchers estimate that more than 20% of Japanese women of this generation (between ages 25 and 34) will not marry (Bumpass et al., 2009, p. 218), to which can be added another 12% who marry but who have no children, while 16% have only one child. These numbers suggest that almost 31% of women will remain childless. If we include those who have a child, the rate of women who have only one child or no children at all is 47% (Retherford, 2005, p. 4).

During the interviews, we wanted to verify the importance of this institution and the reasons that may explain the link between marriage and child-bearing. While eight Japanese women with children had all married before having their first baby, of the nine participants who had no children, only one was married and another had cohabitated with her spouse for several years.

To the question *What are the circumstances behind your not having any children?*, four of them said they did

not have children because they were not married and not because they had no companion. Marriage is so linked to child-bearing that not being married seems to bypass the pressure to have children, as shown by the following answers to the question *In your company, do you feel judged because you have no children?*:

[Tsutsuji-CL] Not particularly. . . But as I'm not married, it reduces the possibility. Maybe if I was married but had no children. . . If we get married, but have no children, one can be sure the topic of children will be addressed at one time or another.

For all other respondents, the issue of having children came after marriage, which seems to confirm that marriage is not necessarily related to child-bearing, although the institution of marriage appears to singularly govern the fertility rate in Japan:

[Momo-MT] After marriage, we lived as a couple for about two years. We traveled to find a good place to live when my husband told me, "I want a child." It was after that point that our first child was born.

[Nadeshiko-MT] Immediately after the wedding, I thought about having children. I first wanted to spend time with my husband, and then I felt I had to have the urge to have children. I then realized that I really wanted to.

The judgment that weighs on unmarried mothers was mentioned during interviews with several mothers who associate marriage with a Japanese custom that must be respected:

[Ume-MT] Ultimately, having a child without being married, it can happen, but it is a Japanese custom, no? In fact, in Japan, a person who is not married but has a child will probably be judged by others and will raise her child in this light. . . We'll always ask her why she's raised the child alone, why she chose common law or even had this child. . .

[Botan-MT] Because I think that's the way it should be. Because that is what is usually done. There is a father, there is a mother, they marry, then a child comes, it is like that.

According to the Japanese Civil Code, a child born outside marriage is still considered illegitimate (Bumpass

et al., 2009, p. 218). And, until 2013, he had been entitled to half the inheritance of a legitimate child. Furthermore, an unmarried mother often faces discrimination when entering the labour market (Bumpass et al., 2009, p. 226).

## EDUCATION

Japan is a society in which education is highly valued. To pass the entrance exams of the most prestigious schools, Japanese parents do not hesitate to devote a large share of their income on boarding schools (*juku*). In Japanese families, a quarter of the budget dedicated to education is spent on paying for these additional schools (Holloway, 2010, p. 151).

Scholarships to help parents with the costs of regular education, not to mention the costs associated with attending a *juku*, are almost nonexistent. In the members of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), who reunited 34 high-income economies with a high Human Development Index, Japan is one of the countries that invests the least in education, a meager 4.8% of GDP, whereas the United States devotes nearly double that amount, at 7.4% of GDP (Holloway, 2010, p. 192). In a poll asking parents about the advantages and disadvantages of having children, the stress related to the success and education of their children was among the most highly ranked discouraging factors (Retherford, Ogawa, & Matsukura, 2001, p. 98). As mentioned above, costs related to education thus appear to have substantially increased the cost of raising a child and may have contributed to the declining the birth rate (Retherford & Ogawa, 2005, p. 15).

Women who choose to pursue higher education, e.g. to obtain a doctorate and become a pharmacist or veterinarian, will enter the labour market at a later age than others. Researchers therefore agree that education, especially higher university education, tends to be a factor in the decision to marry at a later age and, hence, to lower child-bearing rates (Bumpass et al., 2009, p. 227). Indeed, women with a university degree had a 3.5-year higher average age at marriage than women with only a college degree, and the rate of single women was also 5% higher among women with a university degree (Retherford, Ogawa, & Matsukura, 2001, p. 72).

Conversely, a man who holds a university degree is less likely to be single than one who has a lower education. The more education a man has, the greater his choice regarding his future wife, given his better

career prospects. These men generally prefer to marry a slightly less educated woman and women also prefer the more educated men, thus creating a difficult situation for highly-educated women to find a partner (Retherford & Ogawa, 2005, p. 9).

Women without children who earned a master's degree did not hesitate to reveal that this could affect their child-bearing rate. To the question: *What are the circumstances behind your not having any children?*, they answered:

[Rindo-CL] Since I had to spend all of my time studying to pass the exams to become a lawyer, I could not raise children at the same time.

[Tsutsuji-CL] Well, as my degree requires six years of studies, I was out of university later than if I had followed a normal curriculum. I started to work later. And then when I started this job, I could not do things by myself, and it was only after many years that I made progress and felt that the world was opening up to me. But in most cases, in Japan, it is the woman who must care for children and their education. And during this period, it is commonly viewed that she should stop working. It's hard.

Tsutsuji-CL refers here to the responsibility assumed by the mother for the child's success in school. She is now prepared to have children, whereas she was not immediately so after her studies. However, she is also aware that with her job, it will be almost impossible to balance family and work responsibilities.

This dimension of our study generated fewer responses because there were too few questions on education in our interviews. Also, given their age, the women we met quickly shifted the topic to the labour market, because that was the context that was on their minds. This is why the aspect of work in Japan is explored in depth in the following section.

## LABOUR MARKET

In 1992 the Japanese Government shortened the regular work week from 48 to 40 hours (Retherford & Ogawa, 2005, p. 30). But the effects were not what they predicted: people often work the same amount of hours, in *zangyou sabisu*, the "hours of service", which is a common unpaid overtime. Furthermore, vacation

days are usually not used (OECD, 2007, p. 211). In difficult economic times, employees are even more deeply involved in helping their company keep its head above water. This can mean days of 15 hours or more for weeks on end where workers put in 60 or even 100 extra hours per week in extreme cases. Japan is also the only country in the world that collects statistics on “death from overwork”, the *karoshi* (Bernier, 2009, p. 142).

A survey published in *Asahi Shimbun* in 2006 and based on government statistics revealed that over 42% of workers are overtime volunteers. Among these workers were a high proportion of young fathers, as 80% of fathers put in over 20 hours of overtime per month. Another study confirmed that 23% of fathers in their thirties work more than four additional hours per day, resulting in 60-hour weeks, excluding transportation time (Retherford & Ogawa, 2005, p. 35). The economic situation does not improve things; annual salaries declined while overtime hours increased from 6.45 million yen per year in 2001 (9.2 hours per week) to 6.35 million yen per year in 2005 (10.2 hours per week).

The employment rate of women aged 20 to 30 is high and continues to grow, and was estimated at around 70% in 2007 (Keizai Koho Center, 2010, p. 83). However, 40% of women still retire after the birth of their first child, and then return to the labour market in their 40s and 50s (Bernier, 2009, p. 183). Only 22% of mothers with preschoolers continue to work at the same job they held before the children were born (Holloway, 2010, p. 172).

When these mothers return to the labour market, they choose (often for lack of any other choice) to hold a part-time job to successfully balance work and family life. Therefore, “the majority of female employees in Japan are non-regular workers with lower wages and less job protection” (Kinoshita & Guo, 2015, p. 6). Indeed, it is difficult to come back after a work stoppage since companies prefer graduates who are easier to mold to meet company standards. A government survey in 2001 revealed that, despite laws prohibiting age discrimination, nearly 90% of companies had an age limit in their hiring policies (Holloway, 2010, p. 177).

We explored work-life balance with the respondents and addressed the question of whether a woman could continue to hold the same job after having a child. Most women without children said that the employer did not propose any measures or that the ones currently implemented were inadequate. Others bluntly said that their employers rather encouraged them to stop working:

[Rindo-CL] I wanted to become a lawyer and I studied for it. It was my choice. Now if I can balance work and family, I’d be ready to leave the company which currently employs me.

[Tsutsuji-CL] In general, the veterinary field is still mainly practiced by men, although the number of women is increasing. At university, the proportion is about half men and half women, but after age 30, most female veterinarians stop working. A male veterinarian can work and have children; it is possible. But most female veterinarians who marry and have children, they will stop working.

[Fuji-CL] There are none. A person who does my job and then has children—I think she usually resigns.

The most interesting point is that this problem was mentioned even by mothers, who had to stop working due to the impossibility of achieving a balance between their work and family responsibilities:

[Yuri-MT] When I was pregnant with my first child, I was working, but. . . In fact, children and work are irreconcilable. It was simply impossible. I stopped working and I told myself that I would dedicate myself to my children.

[Ume-MT] Not at all. Absolutely not. So when my youngest was three years old, I had to quit. If he was sick, I was asked why I was taking a day off. My employer could not say, “Resign!” and fire me, but I felt a constant pressure. It started to be a problem, so I resigned.

On average, women’s wages were 61.5% of men’s wages in Japan in 1992, which is due to the two-track system of companies, the number of women in part-time jobs, the new wives or mothers who leave their jobs and discrimination (Bernier 2009, p. 189). The highest office of the Japanese Government, the Cabinet Office, published a report in 2001 that compared the situations of men and women working full time with young children. The men allocated a short five minutes a day on housework, while women in the same situation dedicated three hours. Among the general population, Japanese women spend almost 30 hours a week on housework, compared to an average of 2.5 hours for men, which includes 30% of men who make

no effort at all (Bumpass et al., 2009, p. 221). Fathers also spend as little as half an hour a day caring for the children, compared to four hours by mothers working full time (Rebick & Takenaka, 2006, p. 8). Although 30% of fathers say they want to take a parental leave, a new government plan will aim to entice at least 10% of fathers to take the allowable parental leave, up from the current meager 1.56% (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan, 2009: 12). For a company to obtain "Kurumin" certification from the Japanese Government, which certifies that it promotes work-life balance, it must fulfill three conditions: encourage fathers to take a parental leave (at least one parent must have taken a leave during the plan period), promote a reduced work schedule and implement measures to reduce overtime. However, the results are mixed: few companies have achieved certification and among certified companies in 2010, only 1% of male employees had taken advantage of the reduced work schedule compared to 35% of all employees (O'Brien, 2013, pp. 545-546).

These statistics confirm that even women working full time continue to be the primary managers of the home and family. They must successfully complete their domestic and family responsibilities while employed, in addition to taking the time to get their child to daycare. This unequal division of labour makes it extremely difficult to balance work and family and very few women can (and want) to resume regular work after the birth of a child (Holloway, 2010, p. 178; Bumpass et al., 2009, p. 220; OECD, 2007, p. 40; Jolivet, 1993, p. 63).

Not only is it almost impossible to balance a full time job and caring for a family, but it is not financially advantageous to have two people holding regular employment in a single household. When wives earn less than a third of the wages of their husbands, they do not have to pay social security contributions and taxation rates are much lower for this type of family (Izuhara & Hirayama, 2008, p. 647; OECD, 2007, p. 208). The fact that the State still considers the family as a unit and imposes penalties on two-income families can discourage women who earn an average income, and their conditions could improve by simply stopping work (Holloway, 2010, p. 196; Izuhara & Hirayama, 2008, p. 647).

We asked the mothers if the company that employed their husbands had implemented work-family measures, as the Government encourages companies to do. Most replied that there were none and one of the respondents emphasized that this would have been welcome because that could allow her to continue working:

[Botan-MT] No. Right now I have no job, but if I had one, there would be no cooperation at this level.

[Ajisai-MT] Before, I was working more and as we had three children, I had to handle it.

It is therefore virtually impossible to reconcile work and family for a woman who wants to keep working. With so little work-family balance, the problem of birth is not about to be settled:

[Sakura-CL] Maybe that due to Japanese customs, which are to stop working after marriage or to resign after having a child, the situation will remain the same. . .

It is not only difficult for mothers, but, from the responses received, it is also a challenge for fathers who would leave work for an emergency or leave early to spend time with their family. The corporate vision that anticipates that female employees will quit when they get married or have their first child is still very much alive.

## THE DESIRE TO HAVE A CHILD

It is due to a translation error that we have best captured the wish to have children among Japanese women we encountered. Indeed, in translating the interviews, we introduced a bias in terminology. As a result, for those women who had obtained a university degree, who had the career they desired and who faced almost impossible conditions in terms of work-family balance, we believe that the choice not to have children was made to allow them to continue with their profession.

At the end of the interviews, with both groups of women (with and without children), we asked the same question: *What do you think of the many Japanese women who decide not to have children?* In Japanese, we used a form of the verb "to decide" (*kesshin suru*) that conveys a firm and resolute decision concerning a subject; a decision taken with full knowledge of the facts. The answers we received, however, led us to realize that the term used was inappropriate.

The answers fell into two categories: married women with children who did not react to the word "to decide" opposed to women without children who strongly questioned our choice of the verb "*kesshin suru*". The mothers' responses mainly reflected their belief that women without children had made this choice based on their values:

[Sui-ren-MT] In fact, each person must decide for herself. I understand those who say they do not want children.

[Nadeshiko-MT] I think life is more beautiful with children, but it is the choice of each person, so I do not want to. . . The other person is another person, I am myself, and it is my way to be happy, my values are far from those of others, various. . .

[Ajisai-MT] Some are able to take good care of their children, but we must also focus on our life before the life of the children. Having children brings a lot of happiness, when they are happy; I am too. But that does not mean I'm ashamed to privilege my own life. To be not married, to have no child, there's nothing negative.

[Ume-MT] Certainly, having and raising children is extremely difficult. The more children you have, the more difficult it becomes. Those who decide not to have one and who are comfortable together are well, it is a choice that we see more and more, and I understand that. Childless, it would be more fun. With a child, it is impossible to get a drink or go to the movies as a couple. It becomes more difficult when one considers the time that we must devote to the children. That is why in my eyes, childless couples seem to get along better than couples with children.

Ume-MT believes that childless couples get along better because they have more time for leisure together, as they have fewer family responsibilities. Others mentioned that today's Japanese have less patience (*gaman*) and do not want to make sacrifices to raise children. None of the mothers interviewed had reacted strongly to the use of the verb "to decide" as if it were self-evident: women without children had chosen their situation. One explicitly told me about the difficult conditions that had an impact on the choice of women without children:

[Yuri-MT] For women who want to have a career, having children may perhaps be difficult in those conditions. But having children is essential for the future. So we have to do something, to improve the working environment for women. . .

It was during interviews with women without children that the choice of words generated many comments. Four of them corrected the wording of our question by explaining that the word "decide" was a bit too harsh. These women do not associate their childless situation to a "choice" but to circumstances:

[Bara-CL] One should rather say that the problem is that many women do not have children. In my environment, I do not know any woman who does not want children. Some want them, but do not have money; others start thinking about it, but cannot have any. . . So, women who do not want children are very rare.

[Bara-CL] One of my friends does not know what to think about the policy of the government and companies. She is already married and wants children, but they do not have enough money to have a child. In addition, at her work, if she had a child, she would have to resign because it would be impossible to continue working. Deciding not to have children for these reasons is not relevant. We must change things, but it's complicated.

[Aoi-CL] Many of my friends say they would like to have children if they were married. But most are not married; they do not really decide not to have one, but it is their situation, as a single person, who decides for them. Not to have children is not really a choice.

[Sakura-CL] I do not think they do not want one. Of course, everyone is different, but perhaps that everyone wants to have one, but with our lives, it is not possible. Or maybe like me, their salary does not allow them to have a child, or they know that after having a child, it will be impossible to work and take care of the child at the same time.

[Hasu-CL] You said "who decide not to have children", did you not? I do not think they do not want to have one, it is rather that given the circumstances, they cannot have one. Because they are not married, because they do not have enough money, because we cannot balance work with a child,

there are several reasons not to have children, but I think people who really decide not to have one are rare.

This was certainly the most important finding in our investigation. Our hypothesis needed to be revised. Despite the economic circumstances and the lack of measures to promote work-family balance, childless women do not perceive Japan's current decline in birth rate as a choice but rather a consequence, regardless of the importance of work in their lives.

## CONCLUSION

We hypothesized that marriage, education and the labour market were the main obstacles to child-bearing in Japan. According to the women interviewed, this appears to be true, and this assumption can be substantiated by their responses. Our second hypothesis, however, was disproven. This is also the most interesting discovery: the desire for children can be present even among childless women in Japan. The Japanese women without children we met adamantly corrected our use of the verb "to decide". At the end of the interview, we asked all those who had no children: *Would you want a child, now?* Surprisingly, many replied that they were still thinking about it:

[Kiku-CL] It's a bit sad, I think. But given the circumstances, it is difficult, we cannot do anything. . . The choice not to have children perhaps means that Japanese society is not made for women to develop the desire to have children. In Japan, the birth rate is low. It is not because women do not want to have children, but because circumstances prevent them. I think the government and business should commit to taking measures to enable women to continue working after having children.

Thus, there is a profound contradiction between the more traditional and family-oriented social trends in Japan and the socio-economic realities of the country. As they believe it is impossible to reconcile a career with a family, women feel forced to abandon the idea of having children, as we have learned from our interviews. However, this finding is consistent with the findings of other studies, which suggests improvements for the future:

Our data augment the analysis of Rosenbluth, who found a strong statistical association across many developed countries between a higher national birth and a greater female participation in the workplace. She argues that most women prefer to work as well as raise a family, but that if they have to choose between the two, they will suppress their wish for more children in order to participate in the workplace, and thereby gain 'household bargaining leverage and exit options that come with an outside source of income'. According to her analysis, women faced with very challenging employment conditions will not stay home and have babies, but rather will spend more effort 'to get in the door, climb the promotion ladders, and struggle against glass ceilings' (Holloway, 2010, p. 194).

Worrying about the declining birth rate in Japan directly affects the living conditions families experience in that society. Task sharing in marriage, more appropriate attention to parents' schedules, financial support from the State, and a labour market that is more conciliatory and less demanding are essential. For women who do not want children, it is not a problem. But women who want children could then be in a position to fulfill their wish.

[Tsutsuji-CL] Giving people the opportunity to have children while continuing to work and live their lives might be a necessary change. There are indeed a lot of people in Japan who think they have no choice but to abandon the idea of having a life to themselves after having a child. And the creation of a system of family allowances, places reserved for the reception of newborns and a willingness on the part of companies to hire women who have a child or children would lead to a change in mentalities. In these cases, I think no one would give up the idea of having children, as is the case today.

There appears to be a high number of women in Japan who want to have children but feel unable to have one, given their economic situation, the labour market and the difficult conciliation within the family. And, as time goes by, they have little time to think about it and meet someone to marry, and they abandon

the idea of having a child, as Tsutsuji-CL expressed so eloquently. The “choice” of the women who would never become mothers is not made without difficulty.

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