

Japan is trying really hard to persuade women to start having babies again ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Japan's population is aging at an unprecedented speed, bringing the country to the brink of a demographic crisis that will have long-term implications for its economy and society.

At the heart of the problem is that young Japanese are having fewer babies, put off from family life by a discriminatory work culture, the cost of childcare, a precarious economy, and the rapid decline of marriage. This trend, which risks creating severe labor shortages and a collapsing social security system, is an extreme version of what many developed countries face around the world.

In the late 1980s, the widely-used catchphrase "1.57 shock" captured the reaction when the country's fertility rate reached its lowest point in its history (it would go on to fall even further, hitting 1.26 in 2005). The reality that Japanese women had pretty much stopped having babies pushed government into action. The lateness of this push—and its successes and failures two decades later—illustrate how difficult it can be to change the reality of child-rearing in the face of persistent stigma and systemic constraints.

Japan's childcare and education investments

Japan is losing its battle to meaningfully raise fertility rates. Those who experienced the "1.57 shock" of the late 80s are confronting a fertility rate that has roughly plateaued in growth, reaching 1.43 today.

According to projections from Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, the country's population of about 127 million people could fall below 100 million by 2049 and reach 82 million by 2065. The Institute's most optimistic projections put the country's population at about 95 million by 2065.

This trend has accelerated government action, particularly around providing a better work-life balance for working moms. While Japan had some maternal leave policies in place for workers as early as 1911, it passed a law in 1992 that formalized partially-paid parental leave for up to a year after childbirth. The government now requires companies of more than 300 employees to publish targets for hiring or promoting women, part of a bid to encourage women to go back to work after having children. In 2017, it announced it would invest 2 trillion yen (\$18.47 billion) into a package of subsidies for elderly care and for childcare and education. State-approved preschool is now free for children between three and five years old, and low-income households with children below that age get free childcare. And since 2013, municipalities have created more than 500,000 new public day care slots.

Some Japanese towns and municipalities have gone to even greater lengths. According to *The Economist*, the Japanese town of Nagicho managed to increase its fertility rate from 1.4 to about 1.9 in 2017 by offering new moms a "gift" of 300,000 yen (\$2,785), as well as subsidies for children's care, housing, health and education.

Policies that make childcare and healthcare more affordable, high-quality, and accessible, are crucial to supporting new mothers and encouraging healthy child development. The years between birth and five lay the foundations for a child's cognitive and social-emotional skills later in life, and high-quality preschool and childcare programs have been found to significantly improve those skills, especially amongst low-income kids. Meanwhile, research shows that generous maternity leave and policies supporting a return to work are good for mothers' mental health and for their families.

Theory v. reality

Japan's investments have already yielded some results. More than 2 million additional women are working today compared to six years ago.

But several obstacles remain for parents. Preschool may now be free, but it hasn't become more accessible. Approximately 20,000 children are on waiting lists for publicly-subsidized day care, according to *The New York Times*. The government has said it needs to create 320,000 new public day care slots by 2021, which will mean hiring and training 77,000 more teachers. Filling these slots with highly-educated early childhood caregivers won't be easy.

In addition, cultural stigma around work and childcare persists. Only about one in 20 fathers took advantage of Japan's generous policy of 30 weeks of paid paternal leave in 2017, according to UN data. Mothers who choose to return to work after leave often face discrimination and an unequal burden of child-rearing responsibilities at home.

While some of these challenges are unique to Japan—like the phenomenon of *karoshi*, or “death from overwork”—many of them are near-universal. Most countries around the world struggle to provide high-quality, affordable childcare options for families and in many places, entrenched cultural barriers still disadvantage working women who want children—and even those who don't.

Policies like the ones the Japanese government has put in place are a good first step to addressing these problems. But other countries shouldn't wait until they face a demographic crisis to get there.

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