

# Explaining the Decline in Marriages

By Emiko Takeishi  
Socioeconomic Research Dept.

The total fertility rate dropped to a record low of 1.39 in 1997. Despite widespread concern on how to cope with the continuing decline in children, no practical solutions have emerged on the difficult problem of how to significantly increase the birth rate.

According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare's 1998 White Paper, there have been two phases of declining birth rates in the postwar period. The first occurred in the early 1950s following the baby boom, and was attributed to a decline in child births among married women. After a period of stability until the mid 1970s, the second decline began in the late 1970s and has continued to today. This time, since the birth rate among married women has actually boosted the overall birth rate, the commonly accepted explanation points to the increase in persons who have never married.

**Table 1 Distribution of Never-Married Persons (%)**

Age	Sex	1975	1985	1995
20 - 24	Men	88.0	92.1	92.6
	Women	69.2	81.4	86.4
25 - 29	Men	48.3	60.4	66.9
	Women	20.9	30.6	48.0
30 - 34	Men	14.3	28.1	37.3
	Women	7.7	10.4	19.7
34 - 39	Men	6.1	14.2	22.6
	Women	5.3	6.6	10.0
40 - 44	Men	3.7	7.4	16.4
	Women	5.0	4.9	6.7
45 - 49	Men	2.5	4.7	11.2
	Women	4.9	4.3	5.6

Source: MACA Statistics Bureau, *National Census*.

Among married women, the birth rate for women aged 25-29 fell from 242.9 permil in 1975 to 233.9 in 1995. Over the same period, the birth rate for married women age 30-34 rose from 77.1 permil to 123.8. Meanwhile, the proportion of never-married persons in their late 30s shot up from 5-6 percent in 1975 to over 20 percent for men and 10 percent for women in 1995. In addition, as many as 16.4 percent of men in their early 40s have never married (Table 1).

Since changes in marriage behavior have apparently played a large role in the declining total fertility rate, this paper looks at whether the changes are structurally rooted, and attempts to identify their causes.

## **1. Change in Acceptance of Marriage**

A key factor behind changes in marriage behavior is the declining social pressure to marry.

In a 1997 opinion survey by the Prime Minister's Office, over 65 percent of men and 74 percent of women agreed with the statement that "since marriage is a matter of personal choice, people should be free to marry or not." This represents a 7 to 8 percentage point increase from the 1992 survey for both genders. Among younger people, approval reached over 80 percent (Table 2).

**Table 2 Awareness Toward Marriage**

Response to the statement: "Marriage is a matter of personal choice, people should be free to marry or not as they like."

		Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Men	1992	58.3	35.1	6.6
	1997	65.7	29.8	4.5
	20 - 29	83.0	12.6	4.4
	30 - 39	79.4	18.7	2.0
	40 - 49	70.7	25.0	4.3
	50 - 59	64.0	31.8	4.2
	60 and over	48.8	45.0	6.3
Women	1992	66.1	27.8	6.1
	1997	74.0	21.6	4.5
	20 - 29	85.5	11.8	2.7
	30 - 39	86.5	9.4	4.0
	40 - 49	82.5	14.0	3.5
	50 - 59	72.9	23.8	3.3
	60 and over	52.2	40.6	7.3

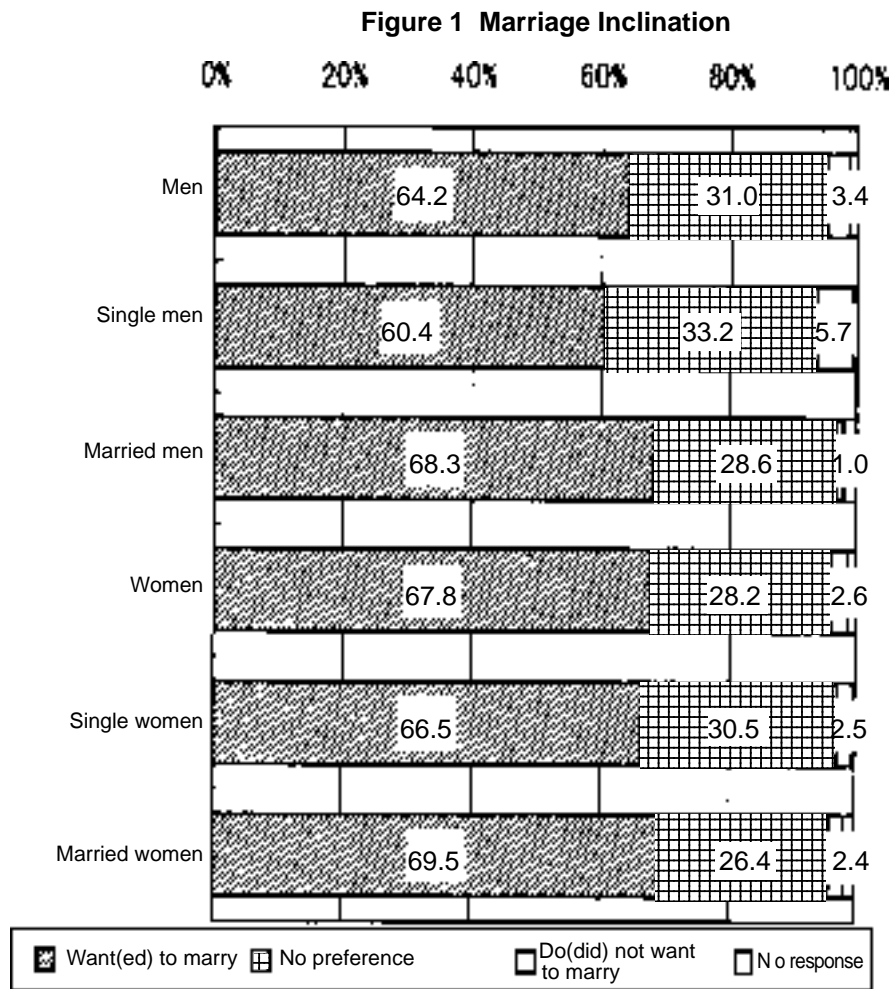
Note: "Agree" also includes those who "tend to agree"; "Oppose" includes those who "tend to oppose."

Sources: Prime Minister's Office, *Opinion Survey on Gender Equality* (1992); and *Opinion Survey on Gender Cooperation* (1997).

In the past, as Table 1 shows, marriage was an expected and almost inevitable part of life experienced by approximately 95 percent of people in their late 30s. Moreover, due to a strong belief in the proper age for marriage, 75 percent of men and women married within two years of the peak marriage age of 28 for men and 24 for women.<sup>1</sup>

Social expectations for marriage have been declining. In the *1997 Basic Survey of Fertility Trends* by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, among persons who have never married, 85.9 percent of the men were considering marriage in the future (down from 95.9 percent in 1982), along with 89.1 percent of women (down from 94.2 percent in 1982). Furthermore, among those responding affirmatively, less than half intended to marry by a certain age (48.6 percent of men and 42.9 percent of women). The fact that fewer women than men showed concern about marrying by a certain age contradicts the common notion that women feel more pressure to marry by a certain age.

According to a NLI Research Institute survey commissioned by the City of Yokohama,<sup>2</sup> 64.2 percent of men and 67.8 percent of women said they want to (or had wanted to) marry, while 31.0 percent of men and 28.2 percent of women said they are (or were) ambivalent regarding marriage. Particularly interesting is that this ambivalence toward marriage was almost as high among people who have married (28.6 percent of men, and 26.4 percent of women; Figure 1).



Source: City of Yokohama and NLI Research Institute, *Survey Regarding Marriage* (1998).

Another interesting finding was that only about half of the men and women thought that there is a particular age for marriage (47.6 percent of men and 55.9 percent of women).

Thus the increase in unmarried persons appears to come partly from waning social norms regarding marriage as more people find marriage to be less of a requirement and more of a personal choice.

## 2. Change in the Marriage Decision Process

With marriage being regarded not as inevitable but an alternative among many possible lifestyles, personal choice is becoming increasingly important in the selection of a potential spouse.

The qualities considered most important of a potential spouse involve psychological and emotional factors, such as someone who is “relaxing to be together” (96.0%), “understands my desires” (92.1%), “shares my values and perspectives” (86.4%), and “listens and advises me on my problems” (86.2%). Qualities that used to be considered important, such as income, occupation, education, and age, are less important.

The qualities sought of a potential spouse (29 items in our survey) principle factor analysis to discern trends among men and women, we found that women are more aware of psychological and emotional factors, but at the same time look for financial strength (Table 3). Younger women in particular tend to emphasize psychological and emotional factors.

Such factors are extremely subjective. Formerly, a matchmaker often played a vital role by bringing together couples based on their compatibility in external and objective factors such as family status, education, and financial strength. Today, due to the important role of personal and subjective factors in the selection of marriage partners, as well as the waning social pressure to marry, there is no typical process leading to marriage, and the border between love and marriage has blurred.

**Table 3 Attributes Desired of Potential Spouses**

Factor	Item	Total	Men	Women
Financial strength	High income	35.9	8.2	52.9
	Owns wealth	9.2	4.1	12.3
	Has high-status occupation	12.4	4.1	17.1
	Has stable job	60.3	26.5	81.1
	Will inherit wealth	4.7	3.1	5.7
Psychological/emotional	Shares my values and perspectives	86.4	81.1	89.8
	Shares my interests	54.2	50.4	57.0
	Listens to my problems	86.2	79.0	90.7
	Understands my desires	92.1	88.9	94.2
	Relaxing to be together	96.0	94.4	97.1
Attitude toward family life	Likes to do housework	48.6	69.4	35.3
	Likes children	74.2	76.2	73.0
	Takes care of my parents	52.7	50.2	54.4
	Values family over work	61.9	66.4	59.2
Social attributes	Has higher education level than me	14.8	1.9	22.7
	Has lower education level than me	10.4	2.4	15.1
	Older than me	23.0	8.2	32.2
	Younger than me	12.1	11.5	12.4

Notes: (1) The 29 items in the survey were categorized using principal component analysis. The top four factors in each group are shown.

(2) Values shown combine "extremely important" and "fairly important" responses.

Source: City of Yokohama and NLI Research Institute, *Survey Regarding Marriage* (1998).

When we asked single persons about their relationships with the opposite sex, 30.8 percent of the men were in a relationship with a particular person. Of these, 12.7 percent marriage, and 3.2 percent were engaged. But almost half (14.9%) are not considering marriage. Among women, 49.9 percent said they are in a relationship, of which 18.8 percent have an intent to marry, 3.4 percent are engaged, and more than half (27.7 percent) are not considering marriage. This is a surprisingly high proportion for an age group that used to be considered the prime marrying age.

### **3. Reasons to Marry or Not**

Nobel laureate and economist Gary Becker has proposed an economic model of marriage that incorporates comparative advantage theory and the division of labor within the family. If family members have different abilities, and some members gain a comparative advantage by entering the labor market while others are better suited to housework, both types will specialize in their comparative advantage to maximize the family's utility. Thus for the husband and wife, the larger the productivity gap between working in the labor market and at home, the greater the merits of marriage.

In the Yokohama survey, the most common reason to get married was “wanted to live together” (73.9%, up to 3 responses). This was followed by “wanted my own household (42.2%), and “was at marriage age” (27.2%). Besides Becker's theory of maximizing economic utility, the first response of wanting to live together can also be interpreted from a more psychological standpoint of seeking a more enjoyable, happier life than at present.

Meanwhile, single persons cherish the single life, with the most common responses to why they don't marry being “haven't met the right person” (39.0%, up to 3 multiple responses), followed by “want to pursue own interests” (25.7%), “want to focus on work or school” (22.6%), and “prefer the freedom of being single” (22.1%).

It seems natural to want to compare single life and married life, and then to choose whichever looks more attractive. As social pressures toward marriage wane and marriage becomes a matter of personal and subjective choice, the comparison of life before and after marriage increases in importance.

In that case, how individuals regard marriage becomes a critical factor. The images of marriage are both positive and negative. On the positive side, people cite “greater psychological stability” (89.0%), “greater responsibility” (82.2%), “joy of raising children” (79.9%). On the other hand, negative images include “unable to do what I want to do” (48.2%), “interferes with work” (27.2%), and “marriage does not fulfill my dreams” (16.9%; Table 4).

By gender, women tend to perceive of marriage as offering stability but being restrictive. In particular, more women than men see marriage as interfering with work. Thus compared to men,

women appear to simultaneously have stronger positive as well as negative perceptions of marriage.

#### 4. Change and Continuity

Marriage is a major life event. If the decision to marry is ultimately based on whether married life is preferable to singles life, the increase in single persons can be interpreted as a decline in the attractiveness of married life. The benefits of marriage are thus defined in relation to life remaining unmarried.

Looking at the quality of life before and after marriage, over half the respondents experience greater financial constraints due to marriage. In addition, while 49.8 percent of men experience a decline in housework burdens after marriage, as many as 78.6 percent of women cite an increase (Figure 2). This can be attributed to the fact that single women often live with their parents, and so are accustomed to doing even less housework than single men. The financial constraints and housework burdens of married life occur to women as a decline in quality of life.

Since women are supposedly , their rising education level and labor participation rate has contributed to the changes in marriage behavior. It is true that the increase in unmarried women has occurred as the women's labor participation rate rose (Figure 3). One argument holds that since economic independence affords women less need to get married, the marriage rate should continue to decline as more women enter the labor force. However, prefectural data indicate that this is not necessarily the case.

**Table 4 Perspectives on Marriage**

Factor	Item	Total	Men	Women
Social	Increases trust in community	62.8	63.3	62.3
	Raises awareness as a member of community	60.4	66.0	56.8
	Offers joy of raising children	79.9	80.2	79.8
	Would please my parents	78.3	76.6	79.4
	Increases responsibility	82.2	89.0	77.9
Restrictions	Can't do what I want to	48.2	49.0	48.0
	Interferes with work	27.2	8.7	38.8
	Doesn't fulfill my dreams	16.9	13.5	19.2
Stability	Brings emotional stability	89.0	87.3	90.1
	Brings financial stability	54.7	34.6	67.3

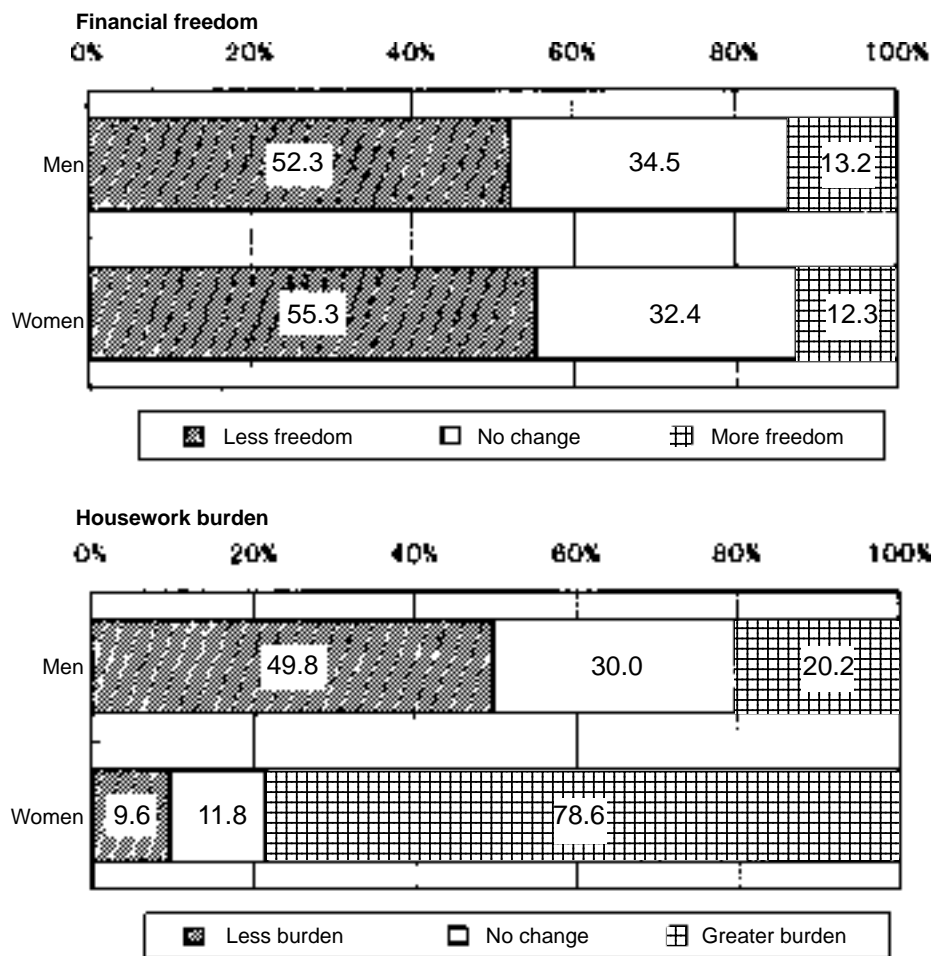
Notes: The 12 items in the survey were categorized using principal component analysis.

The top three factors in each group are shown.

(2) Values shown combine "agree strongly" and "agree moderately" responses.

Source: City of Yokohama and NLI Research Institute, *Survey Regarding Marriage (1998)*.

**Figure 2 Change in Lifestyle Due to Marriage (married persons)**

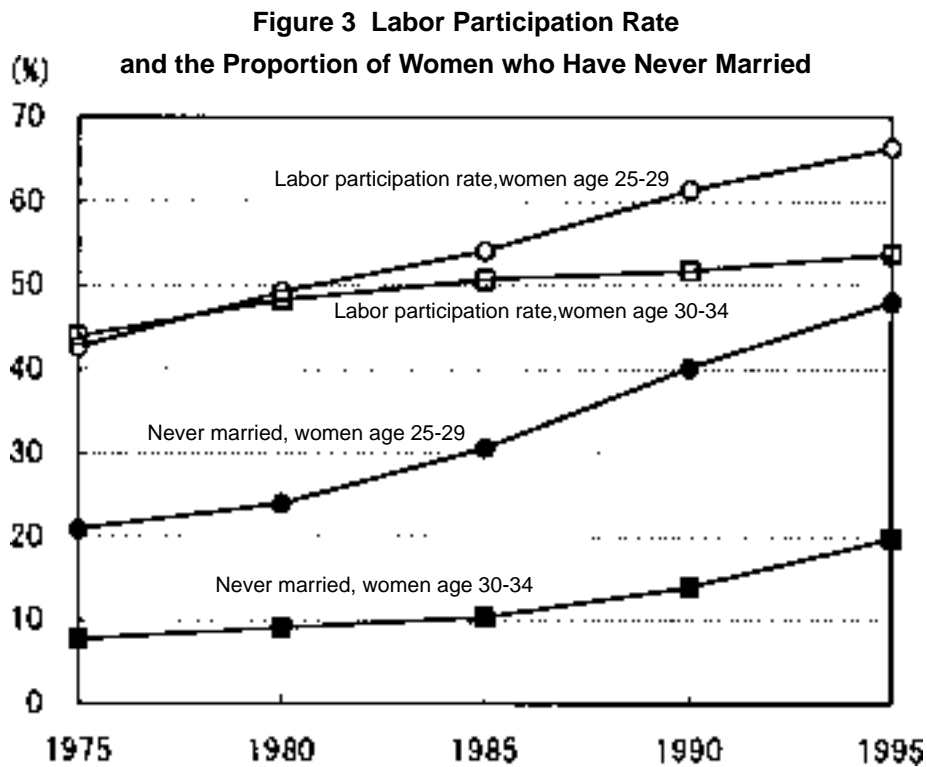


Source: City of Yokohama and NLI Research Institute, *Survey Regarding Marriage (1998)*.

Although Fukui prefecture has the lowest rate among women age 30-34 who have nevermarried (11.5%), the labor participation rate of 68.4 percent is extremely high. The never-married rate is highest for this age group in Tokyo (30.8%), where the labor participation rate is only 57.1 percent. The regional data shows a negative correlation ( $r = -.17$ ) between marriage and labor participation rates, indicating that the economic independence of women is not necessarily linked to the increase in single persons.

Amid the substantial changes in awareness and life structure of single persons, there remains significant remnants of the sexual division of labor in the social environment surrounding life after marriage. For example, while 40 percent of women feel that marriage interferes with their work, women also tend to seek the financial strength of their spouse. If structural changes in single life had occurred along with that in married life, people would perceive such a large negative gap between single life and married life. In this sense, the increase in single persons reflects problems that need to be addressed in the present social system.





Sources: Never-married rate is from MACA, *National Census*; labor participation rate is from MACA, *Labor Force Survey*.

## Notes

1. K. Masaoka (1994) "The Shape and Meaning of Marriage," *Kazoku Shakai Gaku Kenkyu* 6.
2. The Yokohama survey was conducted by Koji Nishida, Atsuko Kuribayashi, Masumi Shiraishi and myself. The survey covered 5,000 residents in Yokohama City, age 20-39, with 1,606 valid responses received.