



# **Commentaries on the Signature Project: "Addressing Labor Shortages Due to Low Birth Rates and Aging Population in the APEC Region"**

## **Unmarried Adults and Gender Equality Matter in Low Fertility Contexts**

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## SUMMARY

- Concerns over sustained low birth rates and their impact on economic growth in East Asia have led to pervasive policy measures aiming to boost birth rates through financial subsidies and incentives. However, these pronatalist policies have commonly mis-targeted married couples as the drivers of low fertility rates, ignoring the rapidly rising never-married population in the region.
- A deeper investigation into the life experiences of single adults in the region is key to promoting family formation and creating a more sustainable society. While many structural factors related to delayed and forgone family formation should be noted, gender equality is also at the heart of this demographic crisis.
- In addition to raising fertility, improving female labor force participation rates (LFPR) in the region can also substantially offset the labor shortage pressure caused by persistent low fertility and population aging, since there is still room for women's LFPR to increase.

## The demographic challenges of very low fertility in East Asia

Over the past decade, societies in East Asia have experienced some of the lowest total fertility rates in the world, averaging below one child. Korea even hit a record-low fertility rate of 0.72 children per woman in 2023. The consequences of sustained low birth rates have begun to surface as most East Asian economies have started to witness negative population growth rates over the past several years, resulting from annual birth counts being lower than death counts. This trend is likely to persist in the coming decades if marriage and fertility rates remain low, raising concerns over labor shortages and economic stagnation in the long run.

## Mistargeted pronatalist policies?

In the face of such challenges, governments in the region have put forth various

pronatalist policies aimed at boosting birth rates, including financial subsidies and incentives for parents as well as expanded childcare facilities and better parental leave benefits. These measures largely focus on alleviating the burden of childrearing among married couples because policymakers have long thought that declining marital fertility rates are the root cause of low fertility. However, the composition of marriage and fertility rates show that the key driving force of very low birth rates in this region is the rapidly rising share of never-married adults across all marriageable ages (because non-marital births are rare, i.e., less than 5% for all economies except Hong Kong, China). Married couples still bear two children on average rather than having fewer than replacement-level fertility.<sup>1</sup> In turn, criticisms about mistargeted policies have emerged, pointing out that the rise of single adults has largely been ignored by current policies and interventions.<sup>2</sup> Overall, studies have just begun to fully unpack the experiences and attitudes of unmarried adults to gain a better understanding into whether rising singlehood is mostly voluntary and whether there are barriers to family formation.

## Research on unmarried adults matters

Based on existing survey research on the life experiences of young adults in East Asia, the majority of the never-married population does have marriage intentions but seems to have encountered problems finding a suitable partner.<sup>3</sup> According to statistics<sup>4</sup> gathered

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<sup>1</sup> Cheng, Yen-hsin Alice. (2020). "Ultra-low Fertility in East Asia: Confucianism and its Discontents." *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, 18: 83–120.

<sup>2</sup> Chen, M., Gietel-Basten, S., & Yip, P. S. (2020). "Targeting and mistargeting of family policies in high-income Pacific Asian societies: A review of financial incentives". *Population Research and Policy Review*, 39: 389-413.

<sup>3</sup> According to the reports of the 2023 NSTC Youth Survey that interviewed 10,000 married and single young adults aged 20–49 in Chinese Taipei.

Raymo, J. M., Uchikoshi, F., & Yoda, S. (2021). "Marriage intentions, desires, and pathways to later and less marriage in Japan". *Demographic Research*, 44: 67-98.

Lee, M., Brzozowska, Z., & Sobotka, T. (2024). "Declining appeal of marriage? Trends in marital intentions in South Korea, 1991–2018". *Asian Population Studies*, 1-23.

<sup>4</sup> According to the reports of the 2023 NSTC Youth Survey that interviewed 10,000 married and single young adults aged 20–49 in Chinese Taipei.

Kottmann, N., Dale, L., (2023). "Doing Intimacy in Pandemic Times: Findings of a Large-Scale Survey Among Singles in Japan", *Social Science Japan Journal*, 26(1): 3–26.

Lee, M., Brzozowska, Z., & Sobotka, T. (2024). "Declining appeal of marriage? Trends in marital intentions in South Korea, 1991–2018". *Asian Population Studies*, 1-23.

in Japan and some of the Four Asian Tigers, about two-thirds of the single adults there indicated they were unpartnered when questioned during recent surveys, revealing difficulties in forming, or a reluctance to form, partnerships as a prevalent phenomenon. Public discussions in recent years have often pointed out the close linkage between marriage and childbearing as an important suppressor of birth rates, given the declining marriage rates and low proportions of non-marital births in East Asia. However, the prevalence of unpartnered adults points to the fact that, even if non-marital births were widely de-stigmatized and accepted, young adults in this region would likely contribute little to total births because of their lack of partners, much less produce more marital births.

Such a sizable share of never-married adults makes one wonder whether they are shying away from matrimony and parenthood. In fact, when these single adults are prompted to report the main obstacles encountered when trying to find a Mr. or Ms. Right in Chinese Taipei, the most cited reasons are trouble finding a suitable/compatible partner, followed by a lack of time or a good economic standing.<sup>5</sup> While compatibility may sound like a vague concept, it often boils down to the differential progress men and women make in gender awareness<sup>6</sup> and sex-role attitudes.<sup>7</sup> As shown in Table 1, men's and women's values regarding family and marriage remained quite disparate during the period 2006–2016 in advanced East Asian economies. Gender differences in values and attitudes often lead to a higher likelihood of partner mismatch during the dating phase, which can further lengthen the time spent on mate-searching. This gender discrepancy in sex-role values and ideal intimate relationships also reflects another aspect of gender inequality often observed in this region, which is usually left out from policy discussions about building a friendly environment to form families and have children. This omission is regrettably not remediable by financial subsidies, flexible working hours, or other such policies.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the statistics reported by the aforementioned 2023 NSTC Youth Survey.

<sup>6</sup> Gender awareness refers to the understanding that men, women, and other sexual minorities have different roles, responsibilities, and needs, as well as that societal gender norms impact individuals and groups. It is about recognizing that social expectations and behaviors based on gender can shape the opportunities and outcomes for people of different genders. Having a good sense of gender awareness means espousing a more inclusive and equitable approach to social issues.

<sup>7</sup> Sex-role attitudes refer to an individual's beliefs about the appropriate roles for men and women in society. These attitudes shape what behavior is expected from people based on their sex. They can range from traditional views that emphasize men as breadwinner and women as homemaker to more egalitarian views that advocate for equal and interchangeable roles.

Table 1. Percentage of men and women aged 20–49 agreeing with statements of family and marriage values in 2006 and 2016

	Year	China		Japan		Korea		Taiwan	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1. A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family	2006	<b>55.4%</b>	<b>54.1%</b>	29.5%	24.2%	39.4%	26.9%	46.2%	33.7%
	2016	<b>39.9%</b>	<b>38.2%</b>	14.2%	13.4%	20.1%	15.3%	35.8%	22.5%
2. It's alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married	2006	31.1%	26.4%	38.5%	42.5%	<b>25.8%</b>	<b>24.2%</b>	42.0%	48.4%
	2016	<b>23.9%</b>	<b>23.3%</b>	60.9%	64.5%	42.2%	39.4%	67.0%	67.2%
3. Married men are generally happier than unmarried men	2006	38.7%	38.3%	28.5%	21.1%	<b>60.6%</b>	<b>56.6%</b>	32.2%	34.2%
	2016	33.7%	32.0%	21.0%	17.3%	<b>45.0%</b>	<b>45.3%</b>	32.8%	31.1%
4. Married women are generally happier than unmarried women	2006	39.0%	36.9%	26.5%	21.7%	<b>54.9%</b>	<b>49.1%</b>	28.7%	25.0%
	2016	34.5%	30.2%	20.5%	18.1%	<b>38.6%</b>	<b>38.3%</b>	30.5%	25.0%
5. It's not necessary to have children in marriage	2006	29.2%	30.2%	24.6%	29.9%	<b>8.9%</b>	<b>12.6%</b>	33.9%	45.8%
	2016	<b>19.0%</b>	<b>27.1%</b>	38.6%	53.9%	19.7%	28.5%	53.7%	61.7%
6. To continue the family line, one must have at least one son	2006	44.2%	40.3%	41.8%	25.6%	<b>58.8%</b>	<b>38.2%</b>	44.8%	27.4%
	2016	40.2%	<b>34.8%</b>	33.4%	20.6%	30.9%	17.2%	<b>44.2%</b>	32.3%

Source: This table is an excerpt from Yen-hsin Alice Cheng. (2020). “Ultra-low Fertility in East Asia: Confucianism and its Discontents.” Vienna Yearbook of Population Research. 18: 83–120. The data come from the 2006 and 2016 East Asian Social Survey. Bolded figures indicate the most conservative groups in a given year.

## The importance of gender equality and female labor force participation

The tremendous progress East Asian women have made in education and occupation often makes gender equality seem like an accomplished task. Yet if one further examines the status of sex-role attitudes and the division of labor at home between men and women, a considerable gap remains. Indeed, past research has indicated that the factor separating high- and low-fertility developed societies lies in the division of labor at home, which is also called the “second stage of the gender revolution” or the entry of men into the private sphere – as opposed to the entry of women into the public sphere during the first stage of the gender revolution. This form of gender inequality connects squarely with

the gender differences in values mentioned earlier, as it sees women as the “natural” home-keeper and caregiver. In turn, women often choose or are expected upon marriage and pregnancy to give up their career goals in order to devote more time to homemaking, whereas organizational culture often does not support men’s involvement in childcare. This view has thus made the opportunity costs of marriage and childbearing high for women and the uptake rates of paid parental leave low for men; both can exert substantial downward pressure on marriage and fertility rates in the long run. Worst of all, failure to achieve the second stage of the gender revolution not only hinders family formation, but it can also inhibit more women from joining the labor force.

While governments in East Asia have been eager to return very low fertility rates to more sustainable levels, another important issue that has been left out of policy discussions is that of raising women’s labor force participation rates (LFPR). It is true that female LFPR in East Asia have made substantial progress across most age groups over the past decades. For all except those in their twenties, however, women’s economic activity is significantly lower than men’s and lower than that of women from other developed contexts in the West, particularly the Nordic region (refer to Figure 1). As a significant share of younger East Asian women have received tertiary education, their estimated labor output will certainly surpass that of the older generations. Research has shown that there is much room at almost all ages to expand female labor force participation in East Asia to offset part of the downward pressure on total production due to labor shortage.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, the reasons causing women’s LFPR to be lower than men often overlap with the factors that depress fertility rates. This is why, in gender egalitarian contexts such as Scandinavia, high female LFPR are often accompanied by high fertility rates, whereas in other parts of the world, the two often show negative correlation. Thus, policies that improve gender equality, particularly those targeting a more equal division of labor at home, will likely increase both women’s labor market

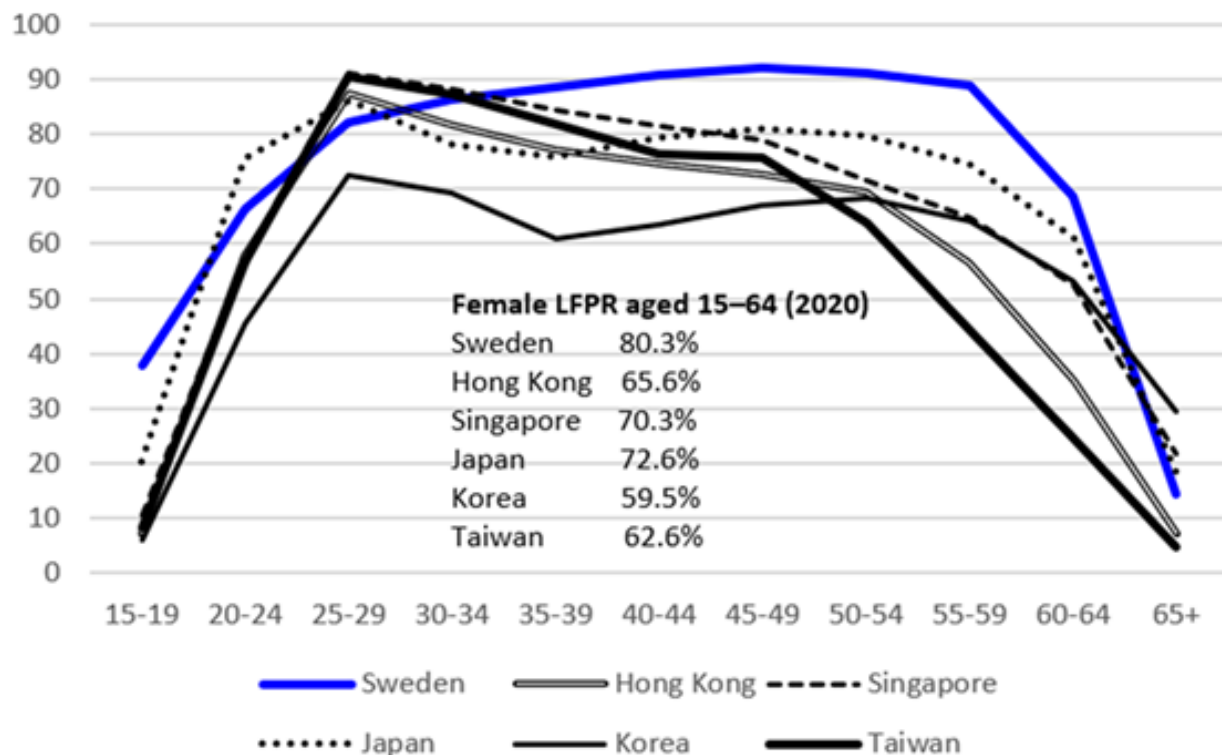
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8 Yen-hsin Alice Cheng and Elke Loichinger. (2017). “The Future Labor Force of an Aging Taiwan: The Importance of Education and Female Labor Supply.” *Population Research and Policy Review*, 36(3): 441–466.

Elke Loichinger and Yen-hsin Alice Cheng. (2018). “Feminising the Workforce in Ageing East Asia? The Potential of Female Skilled Labour in Four Advanced Economies.” *Journal of Population Research*, 35(2): 187–215.

attachment *and* their intentions to form families. Last but not least, the skewed sex ratios at birth<sup>9</sup> so often observed in East Asia will likely normalize in a more egalitarian context, which can ameliorate the imbalanced number of men and women at marriageable ages<sup>10</sup> that tends to exacerbate declining marriage rates (i.e., the so-called “marriage squeeze” against men).

Figure 1. Female labor force participation rates between ages 15 and 65+ in various countries, 2020



Source: ILOSTAT, International Labor Organization.

## Conclusions

Governments in East Asia need to think outside the box of conventional policy practices

<sup>9</sup> In patriarchal societies, son preference is often practiced by aborting a substantial number of female fetuses, which leads to a sex ratio with many more male than female births. A skewed sex ratio refers to a ratio higher than 106 male births for every 100 female births.

<sup>10</sup> Due to the skewed sex ratios at birth, men tend to outnumber women by the time they reach marriageable ages.

to tackle accelerated population aging in the region. Gender inequality, as an obvious layer of the structural causes of rapid changes in family behaviors, has long been ignored in policy discussions. Policymakers and the public should be more aware of women's status change and how our societies have not been able to adapt to their new roles and life choices. This has led to a slowdown of family formation that is not necessarily caused by a diminished intent to marry but often by the disappointment and frustration that comes from fighting against an unfriendly and discriminatory system that is not supportive of women's autonomy and aspirations in a post-industrialized context.

The La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth (2019-2030) advocated by APEC emphasizes gender equality outside the home (i.e., the first stage of the gender revolution noted above) by improving women's access to capital and markets, education, healthcare, and leadership positions. However, if women still face traditional role expectations and shoulder the lion's share of care work at home, family formation during their economically active years become difficult if not infeasible. More policies need to be put forth to incentivize men's participation in care work and to diversify their role expectations towards women, motherhood, and wifehood. Measures that are effective in improving gender equality often require longer time horizons to deploy, for they frequently involve changing people's mentality and values from early on (e.g., early childhood). As most pronatalist policies commonly found now are implemented to reap immediate gains in birth rates, more foresighted measures should also be designed and planned.

In short, advanced East Asian economies should seek to promote more gender egalitarian milieu so as to facilitate more family-building events. If we still believe that family is the bedrock of a society, new families that respect every individual's agency and values should be fostered. We need better and healthier families to make their members feel more grounded, which is crucial to creating a sustainable workforce and stronger economies.