

**Gender Difference in the Influence of Housework
on Voluntary Childless in Japan**

Nobutaka Fukuda
Tohoku University
JAPAN

Keywords: *Voluntary Childless, Gender Equality, Domestic Work, Married Couples, Socio-economic Status*

Background and Objectives

This paper aims to compare and contrast the relationship between housework burdens and fertility intention. More specifically, the present study attempts to examine the influence of the division of domestic work between husbands and wives on voluntary childlessness in Japan.

As is well known, many developed countries have experienced a fertility decline over the past decades. The period total fertility rate (PTFR) already remained below the replacement level across OECD countries at the beginning of the 1990s, and this downward trend continues even in the 21st century. At the same time, the timing of childbearing is also delayed, leading to a rise in the mother's age at childbirth.

A similar trend is seen in Japan. While its PTFR fell from 1.54 in 1990 to 1.26 in 2022, the mother's mean age at first birth rose from 27.16 to 31.89 in the same period. In short, Japan experiences low fertility and delayed childbirth simultaneously. It should not, however, be overlooked that this demographic trend has occurred in tandem with an increase in childlessness. In fact, the percentage of Japanese women remaining lifelong childless reached 28.3% in the cohort born in 1975, whereas the figure was only 11.9% in women born in 1955 (OECD 2024). It is the case in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. By contrast, the average of childless women stood between 10-20% in most OECD countries, being smaller than the East Asian counterparts. Thus, it may be argued that a high proportion of women remaining childless throughout their reproductive period is a noticeable feature of Japanese fertility.

It is pointed out that an increase in childlessness is related to several factors (Sobotka 2021). First, a growing number of young adults postpone marriage and childbirth. Since the number of babies born out of wedlock is considerably small in Japan, a delay in starting a marital life leads to a compressed reproductive period, inducing an increase in childlessness. Second, economic deterioration, such as low-paid and irregular jobs, undermines the economic viability of marriage and family formation. Consequently, lifelong celibacy and childlessness increase in number. Thirdly, owing to changing attitudes and lifestyles, young adults put less attractiveness on marriage and parenthood and prefer the pursuit of their self-fulfilment and happiness. Finally, while women engaged in a gainful job increases in number, traditional norms and values shoulder responsibility for housework and child-rearing on women, especially mothers. Due to this domestic obligation, they have difficulty reconciling their market and domestic work. As a result, this gender inequality within a household leads to childlessness.

Although gender equality has been regarded as a critical factor of fertility decline in developed countries (McDonald 2000a, 2000b, 2013), little has been hitherto known regarding how these factors affect childlessness in Japan. In particular, a more detailed investigation of the influence of housework burdens on childlessness is necessary. The reason for this is first that institutional settings differ among countries (Jalovaara et al. 2019; Neyer, G. (2003)). Admittedly, more burdens of housework and childcare are put on women than men in traditional gender roles. In particular, heavy mother obligations hinder a gainful job outside the home. Hence, working women may choose childlessness to avoid the conflict between employment and family roles. Nevertheless, the extent of compatibility between employment and child-rearing is also affected by social contexts. More specifically, the implementation of family-friendly policies by the government may promote reconciliation between employment and childcare, encouraging couples to

have a child (Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015; Anderson & Kohler 2015). In this case, domestic burdens will have a weak impact on female fertility preference (Neyer et al. 2013). Indeed, due to the Japanese government's active implementation of natalist policies over the past decades, the period of parental leave has been extended, and wage compensation to leave-takers has risen. Furthermore, the provision of public childcare services has also increased. These policies should, in theory, promote harmonised employment and parenthood. Hence, it is likely that domestic burdens have little influence on women's preference for childlessness in Japan.

In the second place, the causal relation between domestic burden and fertility pattern is difficult to be identified. For instance, while large family size increases the total amount of housework, a couple without children has the relatively light burdens of domestic work. This association implies that fertility levels affect the amount of housework a couple performs. At the same time, however, heavy housework obligations may increase reluctance to have a child, ending in childlessness. On the contrary, less time-consuming household chores may encourage a couple to have another child. In this case, the amount of housework may be interpreted as a driver of childlessness. In other words, since housework burdens are endogenous to fertility behaviour, it is difficult to determine the causal relation between the two factors.

Thirdly, the influence of housework may differ between couples' socio-economic characteristics. From an economic perspective, since better-educated people earn a higher income, their opportunity cost of childbearing and child-rearing is greater than that of less-educated people (Becker 1981; Joshi 1990). Thus, women with high educational credentials may choose childlessness in order to avoid a great income loss by retreating from the labour market. Hence, it is inferred that domestic work burdens have a more substantial impact on better-educated than less-educated women. As mentioned above, however, the Japanese government has implemented natalist policies to reconcile market work and housework over the past decades. If these policies have an expected effect, having a child may no longer cause a substantial economic loss to better-educated women (Beaujouan et al. 2016). Thus, it is possible that the influence of housework burdens on fertility patterns hardly differs with women's educational levels. In other words, the division of domestic work between a husband and wife may affect fertility preference equivalently, regardless of their educational qualifications. Taking these points into consideration, this paper attempts to examine the influence of the division of domestic work between a husband and wife on voluntary childlessness in Japan.

Methods

This study uses data obtained from an online survey in Japan. The survey was conducted nationwide in 2019, and its targeted population was Japanese men and women between the ages of 20 and 49 at the time of the survey. Our analysis dealt with currently married men and women between the ages of 20 and 45 in 2019. Moreover, since the data do not have detailed information on their marital history, we selected respondents who did not experience a divorce or a separation by death. As a result of this selection procedure, the total number of respondents used for our analysis finally amounted to 3,971 men and women. In order to investigate the effect of housework on voluntary childlessness, a linear probability model with the instrumental variable estimation was employed in the analysis (Wooldridge 2019; Aldrich & Nelson 1984).

Whether or not a respondent wishes to be childless was prepared as a dependent variable. More

specifically, a respondent who had no child and did not want to have any child was regarded as voluntary childlessness and scored 1. If respondents had already had children or wanted to have a child, they were classified as non-voluntary childlessness and given 0.

The domestic burdens were measured by the amount of housework a respondent performed. More specially, four question items were used in order to measure the burdens of domestic work: (1) cooking and clearing up after a meal, (2) washing clothes, (3) cleaning his/her own house, (4) grocery shopping. In our survey, the level of a couple's involvement in housework was scored by five values: (1) seldom, (2) 1-3 times a month, (3) 1-2 times a week, (4) 3-4 times a week (5) almost every day. We summed the four items' scores of a husband and wife and regarded it as their total amount of housework. Thereafter, we divided the sum of each respondent's four items' score by the couple's total amount and employed this ratio as an indicator of gender equality in housework. Thus, as the value of this composite variable deviates from 0.5, household work concentrates more on a respondent.

The remaining independent variables in our analytical model were classified into two categories: demographic and socio-economic. The former group includes a respondent's current age, marriage age, marriage cohort, and health conditions, whereas the latter consists of a respondent's educational level and employment status. As for the educational level, three categories were used for our analysis: (1) graduated from a junior/senior high school, (2) graduated from a 2-year vocational school after high school, (3) graduated from a 4-year university or higher. On the other hand, a respondent's employment status was categorised into three categories: (1) not working, (2) part-time employment, and (3) full-time employment.

Results

The present analysis revealed that a gender disparity in domestic work affected female fertility intention. As wives take on heavier housework burdens, their probability of choosing voluntary childlessness increases. In contrast, husbands' preference for voluntary childlessness remains almost unaffected by their domestic work performance.

Secondly, when wives with university degrees had heavy burdens of housework, they tended to prefer voluntary childlessness. This relation between domestic work and childlessness was not, however, observed for wives who terminated their education at high school and vocational school. Hence, it may be argued that the influence of domestic burdens on voluntary childlessness differs with female educational credentials.

Thirdly, housework contributions had a similar impact on fertility intention, regardless of husbands' educational qualifications. More specifically, an increase in the probability of choosing voluntary childlessness was not different between husbands with higher educational credentials and those with low educational credentials. Thus, it can be argued that the influence of housework burdens on fertility intention hardly differs with husbands' educational levels.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of housework on voluntary childlessness in Japan. The present study first revealed that the amount of domestic work had a different impact between

husbands and wives. As wives performed much housework, they wished to be childless more strongly. This association between domestic work and fertility intention was not seen for husbands. Hence, it may be argued that the amount of housework has a different influence on fertility preference between husbands and wives.

Secondly, when wives with higher educational qualifications perform much housework, they tend to choose childlessness more intentionally than those with low educational qualifications. Assuming that the opportunity cost of child-rearing is greater for better-educated Japanese women, they may prefer voluntary childlessness to minimize the economic loss caused by having children. In this regard, it may be argued that Japanese governmental institutional support for raising children is insufficient to compensate for various losses forgone by child-rearing.

Thirdly, husbands' domestic burdens hardly influence their fertility intention. More specifically, husbands' preference for voluntary childlessness hardly differs with the amount of their housework burdens. Furthermore, the impact of husbands' domestic burden on fertility intention hardly varied with their educational levels. One of the reasons for this relation is that the total amount of housework performed by Japanese husbands is not so large that it affects the preference for voluntary childlessness.

Gender inequality has been hitherto seen as an influential factor of childlessness in Japan. It may be concluded from the results of this study that gender inequality in housework has an especially significant impact on better-educated Japanese women, highlighting the potential impact of gender equality in increasing the level of fertility..

Reference

- Aldrich, J. H., & Nelson, F. D. (1984). *Linear Probability, Logit, and Probit Models*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Anderson, T., & Kohler, H.-P. (2015). Low fertility, Socioeconomic Development, and Gender Equity. *Population and Development Review*, 41(3), 381–407.
- Beaujouan, E., Brzozowska, Z., & Zeman, K. (2016). The Limited Effect of Increasing Educational Attainment on Childlessness Trends in Twentieth-Century Europe, Women Born 1916–65. *Population Studies*, 70(3), 275–291.
- Becker, G. S. (1981). *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Esping-Andersen, G., & Billari, F. C. (2015). Re-theorizing Family Demographics. *Population and Development Review*, 41(1), 1–31.
- Jalovaara, M., Neyer, G., Andersson, G., Dahlberg, J., Dommermuth, L., Fallesen, P., & Lappegård, T. (2019). Education, Gender, and Cohort Fertility in the Nordic Countries. *European Journal of Population*, 35(3), 563–586.
- Joshi, H. (1990). The Cash Opportunity Costs of Childbearing: An Approach to Estimation using British Data. *Population Studies*, 44(1), 41–60.
- McDonald, P. (2000). Gender Equity in Theories of Fertility Transition. *Population and Development Review*, 26(3), 427–439.
- McDonald, P. (2000). Gender Equity, Social Institutions and the Future of Fertility. *Journal of Population Research*, 17(1), 1–16.
- McDonald, P. (2013). Societal Foundations for Explaining Fertility: Gender Equity. *Demographic Research*, 28(34), 981–994.
- Neyer, G. (2003). Family policies and low fertility in Western Europe. *Journal of Population and Social Security (Population)*, 43–93.
- Neyer, G., Lappegård, T., & Vignoli, D. (2013). Gender Equality and Fertility: Which Equality Matters? *European Journal of Population*, 29(3), 245–272.
- OECD. (2024). *Society at a Glance 2024*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Sobotka, T. (2021). World's Highest Childlessness Levels in East Asia. *Population & Societies*, 595.
Wooldridge, J. M. (2019). *Introductory Econometrics: A Modern Approach* (7th ed.). Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing.