

What's happening to marriage in East Asia?

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Everywhere in the world, attitudes toward marriage and family life are changing. Young people are waiting later to marry and have children. Some are choosing not to marry at all.

The cultural values dominant in East Asia may have slowed the changes in attitude toward marriage that are apparent in the West, but there are signs that similar changes are occurring in Asia. Changing views on marriage have profound implications for government policy in areas such as health, family planning, labor, and support systems for the elderly.

For one thing, postponement of marriage in East Asia has brought birth rates to unprecedented low levels, raising serious concerns about the size of the future workforce. A dramatic extension of the period between childhood and marriage has created a population of "young singles" with their own particular social, economic, and health needs.

Later in life, once couples have children, childcare becomes a problem as growing numbers of married women choose—or are compelled by economic need—to remain in the workplace. Finally, policymakers are increasingly concerned about financial support and care for an older generation who will have few children or grandchildren to depend on.

This issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* is based on a series of studies that compare marriage and family life in three contrasting societies—Japan, South Korea, and the United States. The East-West Center's Program on Population is conducting these studies in collaboration

with colleagues at Nihon and Keio Universities in Japan, the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Research is supported by the Center for Global Partnership, Japan Foundation.

The studies use data from three national surveys on families—for Japan the 1994 National Survey on Work and Family Life, for South Korea the 1994 National Survey on the Quality of Life, and for the United States the National Survey of Families and Households conducted in 1987–88 with a follow-up in 1992–94. The findings reported here are restricted to men and women age 20 to 59; for the United States, discussion is limited to non-Hispanic whites.

WHEN ARE YOUNG PEOPLE MARRYING?

Since 1950, the proportion of people in their early 20s who are single has increased dramatically in all three countries covered by the study (Table 1). This trend mirrors a steady increase in the proportion of young people enrolled in schools and universities. The proportion of young men in the labor force has tended to decline with rising school enrollment, while the proportion of young women in the labor force has increased.

Today, the average age at first marriage in Japan is the highest ever recorded in that country—at 27.6 years for women and 30.6 for men. In the United States, the average age at first marriage has risen

Table 1 Changes in the proportions of the population age 20–24 who are never-married, enrolled in school, and in the labor force: Japan, South Korea, and the United States, 1950–1990 (percent)

	Never-married		In school		In the labor force	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Japan						
1950	83	55	10 ^a	2 ^a	90	64
1970	90	72	18	6	84	71
1990	92	85	28	15	75	76
South Korea						
1950	46	16	7	1	93	43
1970	93	57	8	3	84	53
1990	97	81	19	15	81	65
United States						
1950	59	32	14	5	94	46
1970	54	36	26	16	95	59
1990	79	65	33 ^b		81	72

Source: Computed from census publications.

^aFor 1960.

^bFor both sexes.

more slowly—it is now 25.7 for women and 28.3 for men. South Korea is in an intermediate position, with the average age at first marriage at 26.4 for women and 29.8 for men.

Are these increases in age at marriage strictly a function of rising educational attainment and women's increasing participation in the workforce? Or could negative attitudes or ambivalence about marriage also play a role?

HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT MARRIAGE?

Surveys in the three countries included several questions probing attitudes toward marriage and family life. When men and women age 25–59 were asked whether “A woman/man can live a full and satisfying life without marrying,” responses showed three general patterns:

1. A belief that marriage is necessary for happiness is most common in South Korea, followed by Japan and then the United States.

2. In each country, younger respondents are less likely to consider marriage necessary for happiness than are older respondents. Among women age 25–29, 81 percent in Japan, 86 percent in South Korea, and 87 percent in the United States feel that a woman can live a full and satisfying life without marrying.

3. In all age groups, men place more importance on marriage than do women; women tend to think that marriage is more important for men than for themselves.

One analysis, focusing on young single people, found more negative and ambivalent attitudes toward marriage in Japan than in the United States. In Japan, 20 percent of never-married women and men age 20–27 said they were uncertain whether they ever wanted to marry. The question was worded slightly differently in the United States, and it was only addressed to young people who had never been married and who were not living with a partner. Five percent of this group said they never wanted to marry, and another 5 percent were undecided.

Young single people in the two countries were also asked about the perceived costs and benefits of marriage in terms of personal freedom, standard of living, emotional security, and overall happiness. Young Japanese viewed marriage as more restrictive of their personal freedom and less beneficial financially than did young Americans. Although a majority in both countries regarded marriage as beneficial in emotional terms, for young Japanese women this majority was very small—only 51 percent. Overall, skepticism about marriage appears to be more widespread in Japan than in the United States, particularly among young women.

Changing views on the value of marriage appear to be accompanied by an increasing acceptance of premarital sex, at least in the United States and Japan. In both countries, young people are much more likely than their elders to condone sex before marriage, although women in all age groups are less likely to accept premarital sex than are men. Changing views on premarital sex have important policy implications for the provision of family planning and reproductive health services to young people.

Comparable data on attitudes toward premarital sex are not available for South Korea. The 1991 Korean Young Adults Survey, however, showed that more than 80 percent of young Koreans believe that both men and women should be virgins when they marry.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THEY MARRY?

Perhaps one reason young women in Japan are wary of marriage is that, in a period when women's education and workforce participation have increased dramatically, the institution of marriage has remained surprisingly unchanged. The situation in South Korea is similar. In both countries, marriage is still char-

acterized by a sharp division of labor between husbands and wives. And women who are unhappy in their marriages have little recourse—although rising steadily, divorce rates are still much lower in Japan and South Korea than in the United States.

Survey questions on the typical workweek of husbands and wives shed light on the traditional division of labor within marriage. Although their husbands do not help a great deal, full-time housewives do not appear to be unreasonably burdened. Married women who do not work outside the home spend 38 hours a week on housework in Japan, 40 hours in the United States, and 56 hours in South Korea. (Hours spent on housework tend to be greater in South Korea because the survey used a broader definition of housework than the surveys in Japan and the United States, including child care, work related to children's education, and visits to relatives as well as the usual categories of cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping.)

The problem is that women who work outside the home still retain the major responsibility for housework. Married women in Japan who work 35 or more hours per week outside the home spend another 30 hours on housework, compared with 3 hours contributed by their husbands. In South Korea, married women who work 35 or more hours a week outside the home spend 31 hours on housework, while their husbands contribute 14 hours. In the United States, the equivalent figures are 26 hours of housework for wives working full-time, compared with 9 hours for their husbands.

How many women are affected by this double burden? Although married women in South Korea and Japan are less likely to be employed full-time than married women in the United States, the numbers working outside the home are not negligible, especially in Japan (Table 2). Fifty-seven percent of married

Table 2 Full- and part-time employment status of currently married women in Japan, South Korea, and the United States (percent)

	Japan	South Korea	United States
Employed 35 hours or more per week	35	24	44
Employed 34 hours or less per week	22	3	22
Not employed	43	74	34

Source: Choe, Bumpass, and Tsuya (1998).

women in Japan and 27 percent of married women in South Korea work full- or part-time outside the home, compared with 66 percent of married women in the United States.

In addition to the pressures of employment and housework, young women in Japan and South Korea may be reluctant to marry and have children because of the considerable pressure on parents—particularly on mothers—to ensure the success of their children in highly competitive school systems. In both countries, families have come to rely on private after-school academic programs to prepare children for stringent university entrance examinations. Many married women in Japan enter the labor market specifically to pay for these expensive after-school programs. Preliminary evidence suggests a similar pattern in Korea.

HOW DO MARRIED PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT MARRIAGE?

In the surveys reported here, several questions addressed attitudes about the roles of husbands and wives within marriage. When asked whether "It is best for everyone if the man earns the living and the woman takes care of the home and family," respondents in South Korea were most likely to agree with the statement, followed by respondents in Japan and then the United States (Figure 1). In all three countries, older people are more likely to support traditional economic roles than younger people, and men are more likely to support traditional roles than women.

The surveys also asked married respondents about the quality of their marriages (Table 3). Both husbands and wives are much more likely to feel positively about their marriages in the United States than in Japan or South Korea, possibly because Americans who become unhappy in their marriages are more likely to divorce. In Japan and the United States, men and women are equally satisfied with their marriages, whereas in South Korea women tend to be much less satisfied than men. Overall, marital satisfaction is lowest in Japan, which may help explain why young people in Japan are expressing such a high degree of uncertainty about marriage.

CONCLUSIONS

Fertility in Japan has been at below replacement since the mid-1970s, reaching 1.4 children per woman in 1995 and still declining. In South Korea, total fertility is also well below replacement level. The studies reported here shed light on factors that may be contributing to these low fertility rates.

Despite the marked differences in cultural background between the United States on the one hand and Japan and South Korea on the other, and despite South Korea's much more recent industrialization, these results show similar broad patterns of changing attitudes in all three countries. Young people are consistently less likely than their elders to express positive attitudes about marriage or traditional views on gender roles. These differences between age groups suggest

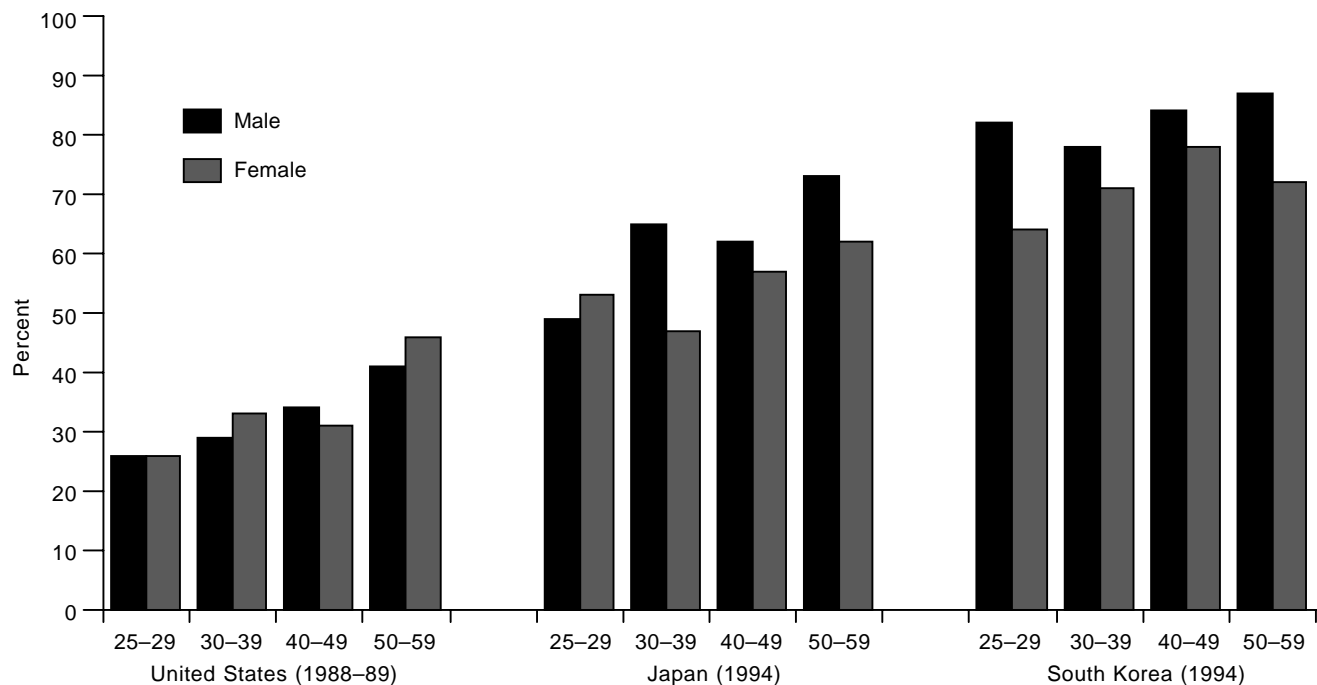


Figure 1 Percentage agreeing that it is best for everyone if the man earns the living and the woman takes care of the home and family, by gender and age group, in the United States, Japan, and South Korea

Source: Bumpass and Choe (1998).

that current trends toward changing values will continue in the future.

The studies also suggest that men and women have different attitudes toward marriage. These differences in expectations may contribute to a reluctance to marry, particularly in East Asia where divorce, although rising, remains less common than in the United States.

Recently, several authors have suggested that birth rates in developed societies will only return to replacement levels when women and men achieve full equality within the family. As long

as young women must expect to carry a heavier workload than their husbands, they are likely to feel ambivalent about marriage and motherhood.

Policymakers in Japan and South Korea might counter attitudes associated with low fertility by making employment conditions more favorable to married women, for instance by providing part-time positions with employee benefits and by initiating high-quality childcare programs for working mothers. Planners might also consider modifying the examination systems in these countries to relieve the pressure on parents to provide expensive after-school academic programs for their children.

FURTHER READING

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Table 3 Attitudes of husbands and wives in Japan, South Korea, and the United States about the quality of their marriages (percent)

	Percentage who feel positively about their marriages		
	Japan	S. Korea	U.S.
Husbands	44	69	86
Wives	43	58	86

Source: Computed from the survey data.