



Addressing Japan's Fertility Decline: Influences of Unintended Pregnancy on Child Rearing

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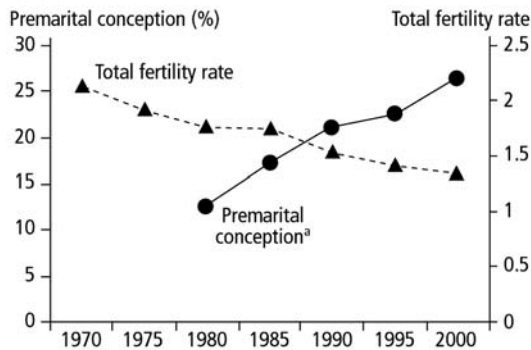
Abstract: *Japan has been experiencing a continuing decline in fertility and an increase in premarital conceptions and abortions among young people. Child rearing is often viewed as a burden. In response, Japan is now seeking ways to improve the child-rearing environment for parents. In this context, we conducted a prospective study among 206 pregnant women in Sukagawa City, Fukushima, to explore the influences of pregnancy intention on child rearing. We found that unintended pregnancy was associated with a higher risk of negative child-rearing outcomes, including lower mother-to-child attachment, increased negative feelings of mothers and a lower level of participation of fathers in child rearing. Unintended pregnancy exacerbates the real and perceived burdens of child rearing. Japan is currently facing a conflict between wanting to reduce unintended pregnancies and increase the national fertility rate. We believe the government needs to address the social challenges affecting people's family lives, which underpin low fertility, rather than focus on fertility decline per se. We suggest Japan seeks to reduce unintended pregnancies and provide support to parents at high risk of child-rearing difficulties. We also suggest adopting a comprehensive approach to improving the lives of young couples, with a focus on adolescents, including life-skills education to prepare for adulthood, marriage and parenthood. © 2006 Reproductive Health Matters. All rights reserved.*

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THE arrival of a new baby brings both happiness and challenges to any family. In Japan, however, the challenges often seem to surpass the happiness. For several decades, Japan's total fertility rate has continued to decline, from around 2.1 in the second baby boom period between 1971 and 1974 to 1.29 in 2004 (Figure 1).¹ The increase in total population has slowed since 1975 (annual increase rate: 1.5% in 1975, 0.2% in 2000), and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare recently reported that the population had fallen for the first time by approximately 44,000 people in

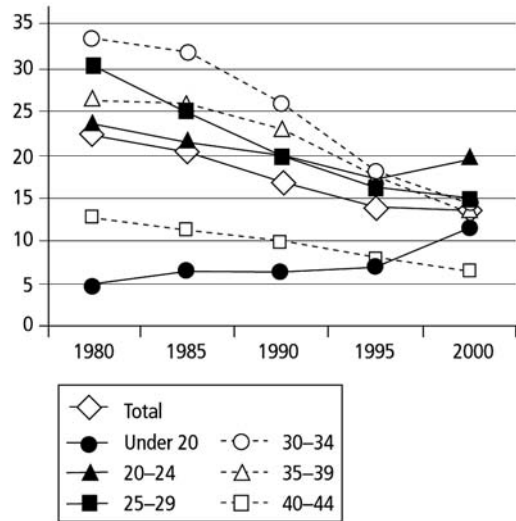
2005. According to the 12th National Fertility Survey in 2002, the proportion of married couples with fewer children than they desired was 37%, and the top three reasons were financial burdens, unfavourable social attitudes toward raising children, and the mental and physical burdens of child rearing.²

While Japan's fertility rate has declined, the proportion of premarital conceptions among first births (births within the first eight months of marriage) has increased sharply from 13% in 1980 to 26% in 2000 (Figure 1).³ The number in

Figure 1. Recent trends in total fertility rate and proportion of premarital conceptions among first pregnancies in Japan^{1,3}

^a Births within the first eight months of marriage. Data before 1980 were not available.

2000 was particularly high among those aged 15–19 and 20–24 years, 82% and 58%, respectively. The proportion of premarital conceptions among first births is probably the best available national indicator of unintended pregnancy in Japan. While not all premarital conceptions are unintended, our previous study in one prefecture in Japan showed that 97% of first pregnancies among single women were described as unintended, compared to only 10% for married women.⁴ Unintended pregnancies are also reflected in Japan's abortion statistics, which show a marked increase in the abortion rate among young women under 25 years old (Figure 2).⁵ Although people are tending to postpone marriage and childbearing, they are also becoming sexually active at an earlier age, often without using effective contraception. Unintended pregnancy among unmarried couples thus is more likely than before. With low social acceptability of childbearing outside marriage in Japan, couples with a premarital conception are likely to marry if they decide to have the baby. A comparison with England and Wales, where comparable data are available, highlights the unique features of Japanese fertility patterns among younger age groups (Table 1).^{1,3,6,7} These include a low birth rate, uncommon births outside marriage and frequent premarital conceptions. While over 60% of births outside marriage occur in cohabiting couples in England and Wales,⁷ the situation is markedly different in Japan, where

Figure 2. Recent trends in age-specific abortion rates per 1,000 women^a in Japan

^a The rates were calculated for census years, and the average number of women obtaining abortions during the five years around those census years were used for the numerator. (Data reported by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare)

cohabitation is uncommon.* This makes the figures on premarital conception all the more surprising in Japan.

Since data on unintended pregnancy are scarce in Japan, we conducted two cross-sectional studies on the topic. The first study targeted 564 women in the late reproductive period and investigated frequency and factors associated with unintended pregnancy.⁴ The second study was conducted in preparation for the present study and used data from one city's health survey among mothers of 317 randomly selected children aged 3–18 months.⁹ The survey provided preliminary results on the proportion of unintended pregnancies among births and the association between pregnancy intention and child-rearing outcomes. These two studies found that nearly half of Japanese women aged 35–49 years had experienced unintended pregnancies (including those that ended in abortion),⁴ and that

*In Japan, the proportion of singles aged 18–50 who were cohabiting was 2% in 2002, compared to 25% in England and 27% in Wales among singles aged 16–59 in 2000–02.^{2,8}

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