

World in the Balance: The People Paradox Japan

>>Narrator: Around the world, in Japan, the population is careening in the opposite direction of India's. 300 children must study here in the elementary school of Oguchi. But once this lone one fifth grader graduates, no new students will fill his place because of a startling decline in birthrates.

>>Ben Wattenberg: Never before in human history has fertility fallen so far, so fast, so deep, and so unexpectedly. And no one should doubt that it is revolutionary change.

>>Paul Hewitt: If you go back and you look at the 1960s, there are all these horrendous titles of books, you know, like "The Population Bomb," but many more. And you find out that the primary source of concern in the intellectual circles about population was, and in some places continues to be, the population explosion. And in all of the industrial countries, our overreaction, potentially, to this concern now has left us with just the opposite problem.

>>Narrator: With crowded streets and packed trains, Japan hardly seems to be in need of any more people. But if fertility stays at its low rate of 1.3 children per woman, by the end of the century Japan's population of 126 million will shrink in half.

The impending decline has become a national crisis, with blame targeted against the soaring numbers of unmarried youth. Called "parasite singles," they live with their parents while pursuing careers and other interests besides marriage.

>>Merry White: Japanese women in the '70s thought that 25 was your last chance to get married. If you were 26, you'd be a Christmas cake, because December 25th is the last day when a Christmas cake can be sold, and after that, you're leftovers.

Now a woman will often delay marriage until even the last possible time before she can have her first child. This is now seen by some as kind of female selfishness, but I think women in general are trying to do different things with their lives.

>>Narrator: Tomoko Omura is a leading television journalist. At age 29, she became one of Japan's first female anchors.

>>Tomoko Omura: I think there are two doors for women. One door have a ladder for promotion, and the other one doesn't really have anything and you just stay on the same level forever. And lots of women end up taking copies and serving tea, and I didn't want to have that kind of work and I was looking for a good lifetime career.

>>Narrator: By age 37, Tomoko had become an editor-in-chief, supervising a team of producers and reporters. Her husband of nine years often asked her when they might start a family.

>>Tomoko Omura: Many companies in Japan still consider women with children as a burden, so I was so scared to have a baby because I thought I would just drop out of the race. So I kept postponing it. But when I turned 37 or so, I started feeling like, I don't know, something was missing in my life.

>>Narrator: At 41, Tomoko gave birth to their daughter, Asumi. Her initial ambivalence about motherhood is becoming increasingly common.

>>Woman #1: When I get married, it might be better to have kids, but I don't worry about it.

>>Woman #2: If I get married, I might think about having kids in my 30s.

>>Woman #3: If I am working, I can live on my own. In the older times, marrying, for Japanese women, was like a dependency. It's not like that any more.

>>Narrator: But besides wanting careers, there's another crucial reason that more women are working.

>>Merry White: In Japan, the economy, since '89, '90, has been in a recession. Japanese women often have to work even to keep their families middle class. One income doesn't work for many families, especially in terms of the cost of the children's education. It's an exceptionally expensive task to raise a successful child in Japan.

>>Narrator: There's a saying that Japanese men live at the office and commute to home, often catching the last train, at midnight. Now, as more women join their husband's at work, they're discovering that the long hours required by most employers make having a family, certainly a large one, difficult.

For Tomoko, it was a tough challenge to find a daycare center that could look after Asumi for 13 hours a day, given the unpredictable hours of the newsroom. For six months, her mother moved to Tokyo to help. Now that she's gone, Tomoko agonizes at the thought that her daughter may be asleep by the time she's picked up.

>>Tomoko Omura: If you are an executive, you can't say, "Well, it's 5 o'clock, I'm leaving." If there's work, you have to complete your work. Right now, I'm trying to figure out how to work with my full ability and at the same time just save the time for my baby. My husband, I know he's busy, maybe busier than I am. Japanese people tend to work for long hours and unless we change that kind of idea, the declining birthrate is going to continue.

>>Narrator: Three hours from Tokyo, near the elementary school of Oguchi, one can glimpse the flip side of the country's falling birthrates. By 2050, one in three Japanese will be over the age of 65. In Oguchi, this is already the reality.

Mr. and Mrs. Ohno's house was once packed with three generations. But since their parents died and their children left for careers in the city, life for this 80-year-old couple has become lonelier.

>>Mrs. Ohno: In the old times, it was normal for a daughter-in-law to look after her in-laws. So that's why I took care of my father-in-law until he died at 83.

>>Mr. Ohno: Our children have grown up and gone to live in Tokyo. They've all gotten married and have to worry about sending their children to school. That is their place now. They have to work, and they can't afford to come back here and look after us.

>>Merry White: The government query now is, "Who cares for our elders?" In essence, though, the government really feels that families are responsible and society isn't. And ultimately when you say "family," you mean women.

>>Narrator: But with more woman working, there's often no one at home to care for the elderly. The stress on families is mounting, especially since neither the government nor private industry has been able to fill the gap. If the Ohnos should get sick, the only nearby nursing home is full.

To ensure their security in old age, the Ohnos had counted on profits from their forest. But as globalization brought in cheap timber from the Philippines, they were unable to sell their trees.

>>Mr. Ohno: I can't depend on my children, so I don't know what to do. It would be great if the government builds lots of nursing homes and takes care of us, but I don't have high expectations. Staying healthy is the best thing, but we can't stay healthy forever.

>>Narrator: Japan's population pyramid looks like India's turned upside down, reflecting how the elderly dramatically outnumber the young. The Japanese now live longer than anyone else, with men averaging 78 years and women 84.

>>Joel Cohen: And with increasing education, we find that disability rates among the elderly have been dropping steadily. That is fabulously good news. It's a revolution in human demography. It means that people of 60 have the function of people of 40 at the beginning of the century.

>>Narrator: But this good news is tempered by a sobering reality in

aging countries. There will soon not be enough young people entering the workforce to support those retiring. Not only will there be fewer workers, but as the population declines, there will be fewer consumers.

>>Paul Hewitt: It's going to be extremely hard for businesses to make a profit. And when businesses don't make a profit, they don't pay taxes. And when taxes don't get paid, you can't support the welfare state. And so the older countries face such a huge problem financially that they really could undermine the global economy.

>>Narrator: To keep its workforce from shrinking, an aging country like Japan would need to take in 600,000 immigrants a year. Yet the Japanese resist, obsessed by preserving their own ethnicity. In stark contrast, America's workforce continues to grow as a result of immigration.
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