

Aged Population and Impact Toward Japan National Security

Herlley Jaubin¹, Noraini Zulkifli^{1*}

¹ Department of International Relations, Security & Law, Faculty of Management and Defence Studies, National Defence University of Malaysia, 57000 Kuala Lumpur

*Corresponding Author: noraini@upnm.edu.my

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Abstract: *This study analyses the aged population and its impact toward Japan national security. Japan faces a rapidly aging population, a demographic shift that has profound implications for national security. This study also shows the challenges posed by this trend, focusing on its effects on economic stability and social cohesion. This study has three objectives. First, to identify the factors of Japan aging population. Second, to examine the impact of Japan aging population towards Japan's National Security. Third, to analyse the strategy of Japan towards aging population. The conceptual underpinning of this study is national security. By using a qualitative approach, secondary data was collected from reliable printed and online documents. The findings of this study are that, first, low birth rates, high life expectancy, and socio-economic factors such as urbanization and changing family structures as primary contributors to the aging population. These factors have led to a shrinking workforce, increased healthcare costs, and a growing dependency ratio, challenging Japan's economic sustainability and societal cohesion. Secondly, the aging population directly affects Japan's national security by reducing the workforce, less childbirth, rural depopulation and elder care. This study concludes that despite the challenges, Japan has implemented several strategies, including policies to encourage higher birth rates, initiatives to extend the retirement age, and measures to increase the participation of women and older adults in the workforce. Furthermore, Japan has cautiously embraced immigration reform to address labour shortages and invested in automation and AI technologies to offset workforce declines. This study underscores the need for a multifaceted and adaptive approach to ensure that Japan can navigate the complex interplay between demographic trends and national security effectively.*

Keywords: Aged Population, Birth Rate, Japan, National Security, Socio- Economy

1. Introduction

Japan, located in East Asia, is celebrated for its rich history, vibrant culture, and advanced technology. The nation comprises four primary islands—Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku—alongside several smaller ones (The World Factbook, 2024). Its capital, Tokyo, stands as a globally renowned city. Geographically, Japan is predominantly mountainous, boasting iconic natural landmarks such as Mount Fuji. The country strikes a balance between preserving its traditional heritage, such as temples and tea ceremonies, and embracing modernity through technological and urban development. Economically, Japan excels in automotive manufacturing, electronics, and robotics. However, the country faces significant challenges due to its aging population. Currently, over 30% of the population is aged 65 or older, with more than one in ten aged 80 or above. This demographic shift is reshaping Japan's

economy, workforce, and society. Public finances are under strain as healthcare and pension costs rise, while the shrinking workforce contributes to a declining tax base (McBride, 2024). Despite government efforts to encourage older citizens to remain in the workforce, obstacles persist. In rural areas, population decline has left some communities on the brink of extinction, as younger generations migrate to urban centers, leaving behind aging populations. Japan is proactively addressing these issues by integrating older individuals into workplaces and society, providing valuable insights into managing aging demographics on both national and international scales (Oros, 2023).

This demographic transition has far-reaching implications, particularly for Japan's economic stability and national security. An aging population increases pension and healthcare expenditures, potentially diverting resources from defense budgets. Moreover, the reduced labor force constrains economic growth and innovation. Socially, a society with a high proportion of elderly citizens may exhibit lower resilience in times of crisis and heightened vulnerability to external threats. The caregiving demands of a greying population also draw resources away from addressing broader security concerns (Ng, 2023; Ismail, 2021). This study seeks to examine the impact of Japan's aging population on its national security and to explore strategies the country can employ to navigate the challenges and opportunities of this demographic shift.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is divided into three main themes. The first theme is centered on the main factors of Japan's aging population, while the second examines the impact of Japan's aging population on its national security. The third theme is Japan's strategy towards its aging population.

a. The Main Factors of Japan's Aging Population.

Japan has been experiencing a significant decline in its birth rate since the 1970s, a trend described as troubling by D'Ambrogio (2020). This decline saw the average number of children per woman drop to an all-time low of 1.26 in 2005, and despite slight improvements, it remained below the replacement level at 1.36 in 2019. This shift is attributed to social changes such as delayed or fewer marriages, a rise in individuals remaining unmarried by age fifty, and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the aging of the post-World War II baby boomer generation has contributed to a decline in population, with their deaths expected to peak around 2030. Japan boasts one of the longest life expectancies globally, with women living to 87 years and men to 81, as noted by Nakatani (2019). While advancements in healthcare, living standards, and healthy lifestyles drive this longevity, it exacerbates the aging population problem. The growing elderly population imposes increasing demands on Japan's social security and healthcare systems, raising critical questions about their long-term sustainability.

Suzuki (2023) highlights the interplay between Japan's economy and population trends. Economic instability in the 1990s, particularly for young men, made marriage and family formation challenging, further reducing birth rates. Urban migration has led to a decline in rural populations, leaving older residents in underserved areas. This urban-rural divide intensifies challenges in providing healthcare and social support for an aging society. Hendrikson and Majoe (2019) emphasize how lower birth rates and higher life expectancy contribute to Japan's demographic shift. Societal changes, such as delayed marriages, increased workforce participation of women, and rising living costs, deter family formation. At the same time,

improved healthcare has extended lifespans, resulting in a higher proportion of elderly residents, with Japan's average life expectancy reaching 85 years.

The effects of an aging society on Japan's economy are further explored by Campbell and Usui (2018). A declining labor force and growing demand for social services strain the economy. Cultural practices like lifetime employment and seniority pay discourage older workers from remaining in the workforce, intensifying the economic burden. However, the authors argue that reforms promoting flexibility and technological advancements could revitalize productivity. Inoue (2024) notes that the decline in birth rates, influenced by two post-war baby booms, coupled with Japan's low immigration rates, has contributed significantly to population aging. Migration to urban areas in search of better job opportunities further exacerbated rural decline. Traditional employment patterns, combined with these demographic changes, create complex challenges.

Oliver (2015) discusses the economic implications of population aging, emphasizing that low immigration rates and declining birth rates have not offset the reduced workforce. A higher elderly dependency ratio and a shrinking labor pool limit economic growth. Oliver suggests policies to address demographic challenges, such as increasing labor force participation among women and supporting older workers. Miles (2023) projects that by 2050, one-third of Japan's population will be aged over 65. This demographic trend threatens to slow economic growth and escalate public expenditures on healthcare and pensions. Weak macroeconomic performance and high public debt further complicate the situation, prompting calls for urgent reforms to address these issues.

Bittencourt et al. (2007) examine how Japan's aging population influences food consumption patterns. Older households tend to spend more on fish, vegetables, and fruits, but less on meat and eggs. These shifts in dietary preferences have significant implications for Japan's food industry and policy strategies. Horlacher (2002) highlights the impact of life expectancy and declining birth rates on Japan's dependency ratio. Urbanization and industrialization have eroded traditional family structures, which traditionally provided elder care. This accelerated population aging, alongside its social and economic consequences, necessitates the implementation of new policies to address these challenges.

b. The Impact of Japan aging population towards Japan's National Security.

Japan's aging population presents numerous challenges, touching upon healthcare, national security, and economic sustainability. According to Kinoshita and Kishimoto (2024), over 30% of Japan's population was aged 65 or older as of 2023, a figure projected to rise to 36.3% by 2045. This trend is straining Japan's healthcare system, with national health expenditures estimated to reach ¥89 trillion by 2040. Without fundamental reforms, a projected ¥27 trillion funding gap could emerge if tax rates remain unchanged. Oros (2023) highlights the strain on national defense, with a shrinking recruitment pool for the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) due to demographic decline. Despite these challenges, Japan plans to increase its defense budget by nearly 50% between 2023 and 2028, focusing on advanced technologies and security networks to address "grey zone challenges" that blur the lines between peace and conflict.

The economic repercussions of an aging workforce are underscored by Sciubba (2023), who notes the potential decline in productivity and challenges in funding national defense. Japan is countering these issues through technological adoption and international partnerships. Katzenstein (2008) argues that the aging population contributes to economic stagnation, reduces tax revenues, and increases reliance on social services, thereby limiting resources for

defense and innovation. This demographic shift necessitates reconsideration of Japan's defense strategy and global alliances. Haward (2024) emphasizes the growing burden on healthcare, with the Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system nearing insolvency due to increasing beneficiaries and a shrinking workforce. Systemic reforms and technological advancements are critical for maintaining healthcare affordability and efficiency. Similarly, Shirakawa (2011) points to rising healthcare costs and the strain on fiscal sustainability, advocating for policy changes to ensure economic and social stability.

Vlad and Madalina (2012) discuss the interplay of declining workforce productivity, increased pension costs, and the need for social security reforms to make systems more sustainable. Dekle (2002) projects a significant decrease in savings and investment rates, with an increasing fiscal gap and the need for substantial tax reforms to address unsustainable debt levels. Chapple (2004) illustrates the long-term consequences of Japan's population decline, including reduced government revenues, a deteriorating dependency ratio, and economic contraction in rural areas. Finally, Muto et al. (2012) employs an overlapping generations model to reveal the macroeconomic impacts of aging, emphasizing diminished labor supply and savings, as well as the policy implications for mitigating these effects.

c. Japan Strategy Towards Aging Population.

Japan's aging population presents unique challenges and opportunities, as well as innovative approaches to manage its demographic shift. According to Chen et al. (2016), the Future Elderly Model (FEM) predicts that by 2040, over 27% of elderly individuals in Japan will face limitations in Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL) and social functioning, while nearly 25% will encounter difficulty with Activities of Daily Living (ADL). Around 20% may have a recognized cognitive or intellectual disability, indicating the growing complexity of aging-related needs. Stawasz et al. (2018) emphasize the need for multifaceted solutions, including eldercare initiatives, birth rate promotion programs, and expanded workforce access for women, individuals with disabilities, and older workers. Baba (2024) underscores Japan's leadership in dementia care, highlighting a five-pillar approach that includes awareness campaigns, prevention activities, and advancements in medical technology. These efforts are critical to addressing the challenges of aging in a holistic manner.

Mulati et al. (2022) explore the integration of digital technologies and health promotion policies in Japan and other Asian countries. Eliminating the digital divide among older adults is essential for achieving health equity and fostering digitally inclusive communities. Nomura et al. (2019) discuss Japan's proactive measures to improve reproductive health and workplace policies. Initiatives include enhanced reproductive health education, maternal nutrition management, and reforms to support family well-being. Similarly, Hayashi (2015) examines innovative mobilization initiatives within the Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system, recruiting active elderly volunteers to support frailer peers. While promising, these initiatives require rigorous evaluation for sustainability. Jones and Seitani (2019) argue for labor market reforms to increase workforce participation among women and older individuals. Improving work-life balance, promoting lifelong learning, and leveraging technological advancements are key to sustaining economic growth and social stability. Akiyama (2020) highlights the importance of healthy aging initiatives, including community experiments that encourage active and socially engaged older adults. These efforts aim to prevent frailty and establish sustainable aging-focused societies. Hofmeister et al. (2010) emphasize the need for pension reforms, higher female workforce participation, and raising the retirement age to address fiscal pressures. Japan is also exploring limited immigration programs and technological solutions, such as caregiving robots, to manage healthcare costs effectively. Horlacher and MacKellar

(2003) provide a comparative perspective, analyzing Japan's demographic changes as lessons for Southeast Asian nations. They highlight the urgent need for policy actions to address the economic and social impacts of aging.

3. Conceptual Framework

National security, as conceptualized by Buzan (2009), is a multi-dimensional framework comprising five core sectors: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental. He argues that security threats can emerge from various domains beyond military concerns, such as societal or environmental issues. Societal security, in particular, relates to preserving collective identities and values. This holistic perspective has been influential in international relations, reflecting the complexity and interconnectedness of threats in a globalized era. Marianne (2009) emphasizes the interdependence between national security and political stability, asserting that maintaining a stable political environment is essential for safeguarding national security. Clarke et al. (2021) introduces a “national security perspective” linking realist international relations theory with domestic political, economic, and social dynamics. He underscores the importance of examining the interaction between these elements to formulate effective national security policies. Nye (2005) redefines national security through the lens of soft power, emphasizing the role of culture, political values, and diplomacy alongside traditional military strength. Soft power, unlike hard power, relies on alliances, norms, and trust to achieve security objectives. Nye highlights that economic prosperity, technological advancement, and social cohesion are integral to sustaining national security in the context of globalization and internationalization

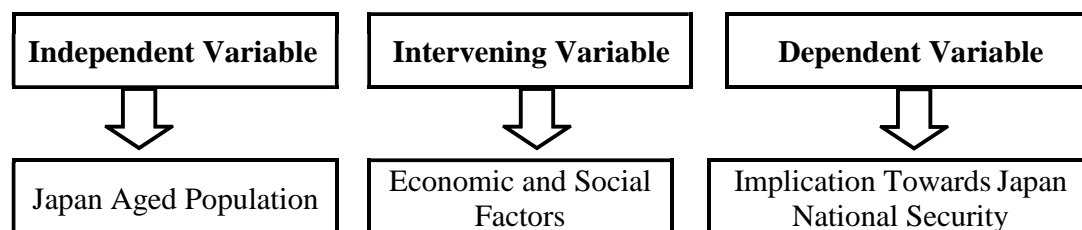


Figure 1: Research Framework
Source: Illustrated by Author (2024)

4. Analysis

Japan's aging population is influenced by several factors, including cultural practices and systemic healthcare. High life expectancy in Japan is tied to lifestyle elements like the traditional Japanese diet, rich in fresh seasonal vegetables, fish, seaweed, and fermented foods, which provide necessary nutrients while minimizing unhealthy fats and sugars (Iwagaki et al., 2017). Additionally, daily physical activities such as walking or cycling are common, along with mindfulness practices like tea ceremonies or meditation, which support mental well-being and stress reduction. The Japanese diet is a key contributor to longevity. It is nutritionally balanced, featuring components like omega-3 fatty acids from fish, which improve heart and brain health (Wall et al., 2010). Seaweed is another vital element, rich in iodine for thyroid function and antioxidants for cellular protection (Kumar et al., 2021). Soy products, such as tofu and miso, are abundant in plant proteins and phytoestrogens, reducing risks of certain cancers and promoting heart health (Cederroth & Nef, 2009; Ganry, 2005). Vegetables, including daikon radish, spinach, and bamboo shoots, are nutrient-dense, providing vitamins and fiber that aid digestion and regulate blood sugar levels (Rana et al., 2019). Fermented foods, like miso and natto, are central to Japanese cuisine. These foods are rich in probiotics,

enhancing gut health, digestion, and nutrient absorption (Gabriel et al., 2018). The principle of "hara hachi bu," or eating until 80% full, helps manage weight and prevents overeating-related issues (Fukkoshi et al., 2015). Cooking methods such as steaming and boiling preserve nutrients and reduce unhealthy fats, while serving meals in small portions promotes a diverse intake of vitamins and minerals. Together, Japan's diet and lifestyle embody a holistic approach to health, emphasizing minimally processed foods, mindful eating, physical activity, and social engagement. These factors contribute not only to longevity but also to a high quality of life (Iwagaki et al., 2017).

The number of fitness clubs in Japan grew significantly from around 9,000 in 2020 to approximately 10,600 by 2023, as reported by Watanabe and Takahashi (2021). This growth, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, stemmed from heightened awareness about physical health and its role in immune system strengthening. To address health concerns, fitness centers implemented strict safety protocols, encouraging members to return. The rise of 24-hour fitness clubs also played a significant role, accommodating individuals with demanding schedules by allowing flexibility for workouts. Additionally, government initiatives promoting exercise and well-being supported the expansion of the fitness industry. Incentives for fitness-related businesses and public campaigns led to the establishment of new gyms and expansion of existing ones. These factors, combined with cultural values emphasizing health and longevity, contributed to the surge in fitness club numbers. Japan's active lifestyle is deeply ingrained in its culture. Beyond regular exercise, daily habits such as walking and cycling are prevalent. The public transportation system encourages walking, and urban designs integrate parks and recreational facilities, fostering an environment conducive to physical activity. These practices help maintain heart health, manage weight, and reduce chronic disease risks (Okumura, 2023). Traditional exercises, like radio calisthenics, are a staple in Japanese culture, often performed in groups to enhance social bonds and mental well-being. Older adults actively participate in activities such as tai chi and yoga, promoting physical and cognitive health (Kojima et al., 2018). The Japanese diet complements their active lifestyle. It features low-calorie, nutrient-rich foods, including fish, vegetables, rice, and soy products, providing energy for physical activity while minimizing obesity risks (Salen & Korgeril, 2011). Urban planning further integrates physical activity into daily life through pedestrian-friendly cities and efficient public transport systems.

Cultural discipline and structured routines encourage daily movement. Physical education in schools instills healthy habits in children, while many workplaces provide breaks for physical activity, recognizing the value of a healthy workforce (Lowe, 2003). In addition to physical health, Japan prioritizes mental and emotional well-being through mindfulness and meditation, aiding stress management and fostering positivity. The concept of *ikigai*, or a sense of purpose, underpins Japanese life, encompassing work, hobbies, and social connections, which significantly contribute to happiness and longevity (Riichiro, 2014). A robust support system for elders helps them stay independent and engaged in communities. Programs and facilities cater to their social, physical, and lifelong learning needs (Campbell & Ikegami, 2000). Together, these factors—active lifestyles, balanced diets, strong relationships, and excellent healthcare—enable long, healthy lives, reflecting a holistic approach to well-being.

As of July 2020, approximately 59% of respondents in Japan expressed satisfaction with the healthcare system, while only 3.5% were highly dissatisfied (Klein, 2024). Japan's healthcare is globally recognized for its excellence, contributing to one of the world's highest life expectancies. The universal health coverage system ensures that all residents have access to affordable medical care. This system combines public funding, employer contributions, and

private insurance, with the government setting prices for medical procedures and drugs to control costs. Preventive care is a critical focus, as employers mandate regular health check-ups to detect illnesses early (James, 2014). Universal vaccination campaigns and health initiatives encourage balanced diets and active lifestyles, reducing chronic disease rates and improving overall health. Japan's advanced medical infrastructure includes highly trained professionals and state-of-the-art technology, leading to low infant mortality rates and high survival rates for various diseases. Cultural factors, such as a nutrient-rich diet and physically active lifestyles, further enhance health outcomes. Strong social relationships provide essential emotional support for mental well-being. Moreover, technological advancements like electronic health records and telemedicine streamline healthcare delivery and improve diagnostic outcomes (Abraham et al., 2011).

Bowling and Dieppe (2005) introduced two models for successful aging: the biomedical model, focusing on disease absence and physical/mental functionality, and the psychosocial model, emphasizing life satisfaction, social participation, and psychological resources. Studies show older adults often consider themselves aging successfully despite physical challenges, due to resilience and social support systems (Bartley et al., 2019). Resilience is a fluid characteristic that can be strengthened through physical activity, as shown by survivors of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, who displayed improved adaptation and well-being (Kukihara et al., 2014). Physical activity has been linked to reduced depression severity and enhanced resilience (Yoshikawa et al., 2015). Mindfulness-based practices, such as yoga and meditation, are widely used to improve mental health, addressing anxiety and depression with proven success (Hofmann et al., 2010). Mindfulness involves being present without judgment, fostering emotional well-being and stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Yoga, in particular, enhances resilience and reduces workplace stress (Hartfiel et al., 2011). Studies also confirm strong correlations between mindfulness and resilience (Kemper et al., 2015). The integration of exercise and mindfulness practices offers older adults a pathway to improved physical and psychological health, contributing positively to their overall aging experience.

Japan's demographic challenges arise from factors such as labor market segmentation and work-life imbalances. Full-time employees in large Japanese corporations enjoy significantly higher wages than those in non-standard jobs, leading to migration toward urban areas and away from rural regions. Japan's culture of long work hours, coupled with limited childcare infrastructure, makes maintaining a career and raising a family both difficult and costly. Consequently, urban areas experience notably lower fertility rates (OECD, 2016). Women face significant hurdles as balancing family life with careers often compels them to abandon workplace participation. Social pressures further exacerbate the situation, pushing many women out of employment after marriage or childbirth (Coulmas, 2007). Additionally, competitive professional environments penalize women for taking maternity leave, discouraging family formation. Moreover, changing societal attitudes have led to a growing disinterest in traditional romantic relationships. A 2013 national survey by the Japan Family Planning Association revealed that 45% of women aged 16-24 and over 25% of men expressed disinterest or aversion to sexual contact (Haworth, 2013). These factors collectively contribute to delayed marriages and declining birth rates.

Japan's aging workforce presents a major challenge. As of 2022, 9.1 million individuals aged 65 and older were employed, comprising 13.6% of the total workforce. Employment rates among those aged 65-69 reached 50.8%, while 33.5% of those aged 70 and above were active in the workforce. Even among those aged 75 and older, 11% remained employed (Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2022). However, retiring workers are not

being replaced quickly enough by new hires. This labor shortage threatens key industries like motor vehicles and electronics, which are vital to Japan's global economic standing (Inman, 2011). Efforts to solve the labor shortage by increasing working hours or raising retirement ages may backfire, as overwork is already widespread and detrimental to health (White, 2016; Ridionova, 2016). Productivity improvements through automation and robotics provide some relief. Japan has already integrated significant levels of automation in manufacturing, which could maintain or even boost production levels with fewer workers (Lewis, 2014). However, while technological advancements can sustain output, the aging population places increasing demands on social security and public pension systems. With fewer young workers contributing taxes, funding these programs becomes unsustainable without significant tax increases, which would harm the economy (Jack, 2016). Traditionally, Japanese families alleviated some of the strain through multi-generational households, where adult children cared for aging parents. However, declining birth rates mean fewer caregivers for elderly dependents, further increasing the assistance burden per senior (Kato, 2013).

Since 1986, Japan has seen significant changes in household composition, with steady declines in one-child households and sharper declines in families with two or three children. This shift stems from rising living costs, extended working hours, urbanization, and evolving cultural attitudes toward marriage and childbearing. Many Japanese couples delay or opt out of having children, prioritizing careers, education, and personal development. These trends are compounded by the aging population, resulting in fewer young people entering their reproductive years and raising concerns about a diminishing labor force and increasing welfare burdens (Nippon, 2022). Cultural shifts further influence these patterns. Coulmas (2007) highlights that extended work hours, job insecurity, concerns about future pensions, and caregiving responsibilities for elderly parents deter families from having multiple children. The prevalence of one-child households contributes to new social dynamics, as solitary children often experience minimal socialization and increasingly rely on electronic communication rather than face-to-face interaction.

Rural depopulation is another challenge accompanying Japan's declining and aging population. Many young people migrate to urban centers for education and employment, leaving rural areas economically weakened and populated mainly by older residents. This trend skews the rural population pyramid, as evidenced in Figure 3.3, with significant consequences for local economies and caregiving dynamics (Thompson, 2003). Kato (2014) describes Japan as becoming a "Pole society," where urban clusters like Tokyo grow while rural areas empty. Urbanization discourages large families, as urban environments are less conducive to raising children. This has led to school closures in rural areas due to dwindling student populations, with nearly half of Japan's public elementary and junior high schools operating with fewer students. While smaller class sizes offer personalized learning, they risk hindering students' social and independent work skills (Fifield, 2015). The labor shortage in rural areas extends to critical sectors like nursing and caregiving, creating systemic challenges. In 2024, 61% of care worker positions were unfilled due to low birth rates, increased retirements, and the demanding nature of caregiving jobs (Statista Research Department, 2024). Cultural values rooted in caring for elderly parents within family settings add to the strain, although these traditions are becoming less viable given the aging population and diminishing household sizes (Hayashi, 2011). Even as institutional elder care gains social acceptability, Japan lacks the workforce to meet growing demands. The country needs an estimated one million additional nurses and caregivers by 2025, yet immigration—seen as a potential solution—remains limited due to language barriers and stringent requirements. Since 2008, only 304 foreign caregivers have

settled in Japan, largely due to challenges in passing the national licensing exams in Japanese (Oi, 2015).

Japan's Strategy Towards Aging Population

To address its demographic challenges, Japan has implemented a multidimensional strategy aimed at fostering inclusive and sustainable communities. Limited immigration forms part of its growth plan to mitigate labor shortages, alongside initiatives to promote gender equality by increasing women's labor force participation and retention. Efforts to rejuvenate rural communities include incentives for businesses to relocate and measures to encourage young people to settle outside urban centers. These approaches highlight Japan's dedication to maintaining its economic stability and social cohesion despite demographic pressures. To address the challenges of its aging population, Japan could adopt a strategic immigration policy rather than treating it as a last-minute solution. YeongHae Jung (2014) suggests that Japan must embrace coexistence with foreigners, domestic communities, and East Asian cultures to create an inclusive society. Fundamental changes, such as accepting dual citizenship, redefining national identity to include hybrid identities, and establishing residency-based citizenship, could foster multicultural coexistence. Such reforms would help make immigration a practical solution for labor shortages, while also fostering economic growth and reducing societal intolerance. According to a United Nations (2014) report, Japan would need to admit over 600,000 migrant workers annually for the next 50 years to sustain its workforce. The Japan Business Federation supports immigration as an economic strategy, citing its potential to stabilize taxes and social security burdens. However, institutional and societal discrimination against foreigners remains a major barrier (Jung, 2014). Programs to attract skilled workers have also faced challenges, as many qualified individuals perceive Japan's environment as unwelcoming. Economic models indicate that admitting 150,000 immigrants annually could improve Japan's saving rates and gross national product while easing fiscal pressures on future generations. Shimasawa and Oguro (2008) emphasize that fiscal reforms, such as increasing the consumption tax, could amplify these benefits by 2100.

Japan's fertility rate remains critically low at 1.26 births per woman, prompting government alarm. Population decline began in 2005 due to persistently low fertility rates, which could harm economic demand. The "1.57 shock" in 1990, when fertility reached an all-time low, led to the formation of an interministerial committee aimed at creating a supportive environment for childbearing (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2003). Child allowances, first introduced in 1972 to support low-income families, were significantly increased post-1990 in response to falling fertility. Currently, couples receive subsidies of \$100 per month for each child under two years old and \$50 for the first two children until the child completes third grade, subject to income caps (Ma, 2009). The Childcare Leave Act of 1991 granted unpaid leave to full-time employees, encouraging working parents to start families (Asai, 2015). The Angel Plan (1995-1999) and the New Angel Plan (2000-2004) expanded childcare facilities and after-school programs, easing the burden on parents. Subsequent policies, such as the Employment Insurance Law amendment in 2001, increased paid parental leave benefits to 40% of salaries. To address social pressures preventing childcare leave, the "Plus One" Plan (2002) encouraged shared responsibilities between spouses. The Law on Next Generation (2003) required large employers to implement strategies for increasing birth rates among staff, fostering an environment more conducive to family formation (Leonard, 2020).

Gender equality is closely tied to Japan's fertility rates and demographic challenges. Ranked 111th out of 144 countries in the 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, Japan faces criticism for its workplace culture, which often pressures women to choose between careers and raising

children (World Economic Forum, 2016). Gender inequality contributes to delayed marriages, rising numbers of unmarried couples, and societal disapproval of extramarital childbearing. Traditional societal values, such as a male-dominated warrior culture, further slow progress toward gender parity (Cortazzi, 2015). Although the Japanese government has taken steps to improve gender equality, including establishing the Gender Equality Bureau under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, progress has been limited. Abe's administration aimed to increase the employment rate of women aged 25-44 from 68% in 2012 to 73% in 2020 and ensure women occupy at least 30% of managerial roles. Efforts include constructing 400,000 new nursery schools to address childcare shortages and incentivizing companies to hire more women in leadership roles (Tetsu, 2016).

Resistance to these policies stems from tensions between traditional values and modern initiatives. Many view policies promoting shared parental responsibilities and increased female workforce participation as threats to traditional family structures. Social expectations also discourage men from taking parental leave and criticize working mothers for neglecting their children (Kano, 2015). To move toward greater gender equality, cultural norms around parenting and motherhood must evolve, societal support for working parents must improve, and work-life balance must be prioritized.

Rural depopulation, driven by population decline and demographic shifts, poses a significant challenge for Japan. A 2015 Japan Policy Council report predicted that by 2040, 869 municipalities would experience a dramatic decrease in women of childbearing age, risking the survival of these areas. This sparked national debate and prompted Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to propose a one trillion-yen fund to stimulate rural economies through regional government initiatives. Measures include attracting companies to relocate their headquarters and supporting new industries outside urban centers (Yoshida, 2015). Kato (2014) emphasizes that restricting migration to Tokyo is not a viable solution, as it could harm the national economy. Instead, Tokyo should be enhanced as both an economic hub and a family-friendly city. Events like the 2020 Tokyo Olympics provide opportunities to improve infrastructure and international trade. Research suggests that increased government spending on social programs for young families correlates with higher fertility rates. To combat rural decline, Kato proposes investing in "homegrown center cities" to provide education, employment, and cultural amenities for youth. Establishing subcenter cities with strong transport links to central cities could also encourage regional retention. By addressing rural depopulation and demographic challenges through inclusive and forward-thinking policies, Japan can work toward preserving its social and economic cohesion.

5. Conclusion

Japan's approach to addressing its aging population and demographic challenges involves a multifaceted strategy aimed at maintaining economic stability and social cohesion. Efforts to mitigate labor shortages include limited immigration policies, gender equality initiatives, and measures to enhance rural communities. Experts emphasize the potential of strategic immigration and multicultural coexistence as long-term solutions, highlighting the need for institutional reforms like dual citizenship and residency-based citizenship to foster inclusion. To counter low fertility rates, the government has implemented various child-support policies, such as financial subsidies, parental leave benefits, and expanded childcare services. Gender equality remains a critical issue, as traditional cultural norms and workplace expectations limit women's participation in the workforce and impact family dynamics. Progressive policies addressing work-life balance, shared parental responsibilities, and support for working mothers

are essential to improving gender parity. Rural depopulation presents additional challenges, with measures focusing on revitalizing local economies and improving regional infrastructure. Investing in "homegrown center cities" and enhancing urban-rural connectivity are seen as sustainable approaches to mitigate regional decline. By advancing inclusive immigration policies, supporting young families, fostering gender equality, and addressing rural depopulation, Japan demonstrates its commitment to navigating the complex issues posed by its aging population. These strategies, while ambitious, require ongoing societal and institutional reforms to ensure long-term success.

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