

Addressing Labor Shortages Due to Low Birth Rates and Aging Population in the APEC Region

**Unmarried Adults and Gender Equality Matter
in Low Fertility Contexts**

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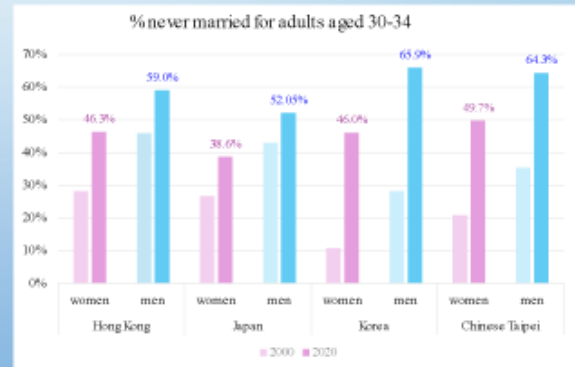


**The demographic challenges of very
low fertility in East Asia**

- Over the past decade, East Asia (EA) has gone through some lowest period total fertility rates in the world, averaging **below one child**.
- Hong Kong even hit a record-low birth rate of **0.7** child in 2022 & South Korea **0.72** in 2023.
- Consequences of sustained low birth rates have begun as East Asian economies started to witness negative **population growth rates**, resulting from annual birth counts being lower than death counts.
- This trend is likely to persist in the coming decades, raising concerns over **labor shortage and economic stagnation** in the long run.

Mistargeted pronatalist policies?

- EA governments have put forth pronatalist policies with an aim to boost birth rates → largely focus on **alleviating the burden of marrieds**.
- Yet the key driving force of very low birth rates here is caused by rapidly **rising share of never married adults across all marriageable ages** (the increases are particularly striking in Korea and Chinese Taipei), because non-marital births are rare (<4%, except Hong Kong).
- Married couples have **~2 children on average**.



Research on unmarried adults matters

- According to survey data, the majority of the never married population actually have **marriage intentions** but seem to have encountered problems finding a suitable partner. → **2/3 single adults unpartnered** at the time of survey in Chinese Taipei, Japan, and Korea
- Breaking the marriage-fertility link is irrelevant, because single adults would likely contribute little to total births because of their lack of partners
- The most commonly cited reasons of singlehood are **having trouble finding a suitable/compatible partner**, followed by a lack of time or a good economic standing.
- **Compatibility?** differential progress men and women make in **gender awareness and sex-role attitudes** → higher likelihood of partner mismatch during the dating phase, which can lengthen the time spent on mate-searching

Men's family values tend to be more conservative than women

	Year	China		Japan		Korea		Taiwan	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1. A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family	2006	55.4%	54.1%	29.5%	24.2%	39.4%	26.9%	46.2%	33.7%
	2016	39.9%	38.2%	14.2%	13.4%	20.1%	15.3%	35.8%	22.5%
6. To continue the family line, one must have at least one son	2006	44.2%	40.3%	41.8%	25.6%	58.8%	38.2%	44.8%	27.4%
	2016	40.2%	34.8%	33.4%	20.6%	30.9%	17.2%	44.2%	32.3%

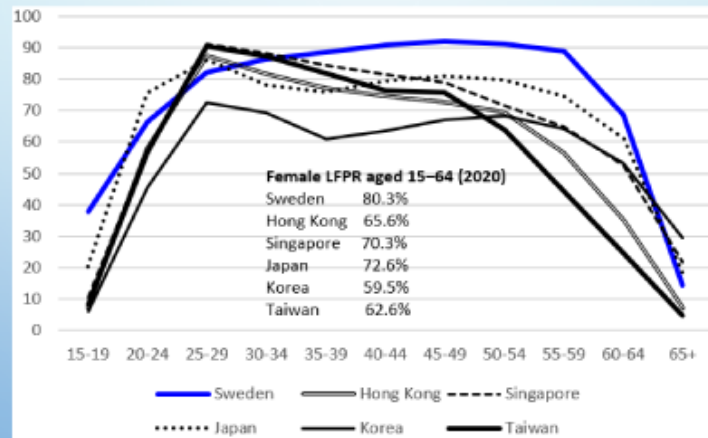
* **Bolded figures indicate the most conservative groups in a given year.**

Source: Table excerpt from Yen-hsin Alice Cheng. (2020). "Ultra-low Fertility in East Asia: Confucianism and its discontents." *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, 18: 83-120. Data were drawn from the 2006 and 2016 East Asian Social Survey.

The importance of gender equality and female labor force participation

- Gender equality as a accomplished goal? A considerable gap still remains in men's and women's **sex-role attitudes** and **division of labor at home** between men and women.
- The unfinished gender revolution → Attaining **equal division of labor at home** to attain the second stage (women as the "natural" home-keeper and caregiver) gender revolution.
- **Alternative route:** Raising women's labor force participation rates (LFPR) to higher levels as an alternative to raising fertility rates!
- **Overlapping causes:** The reasons causing women's LFPR to be lower than men often overlap with factors that depress fertility rates → policies that improve gender equality, particular those for more equal division of labor at home, will likely increase both women's labor market attachment and their intentions to form families!

Female labor force participation rates between 15 and 64 in 2020
East Asia vs. Sweden



Source: Loichinger & Cheng (2018) Data drawn from ILOSTAT, International Labor Organization

CONCLUSION

- Governments in East Asia need to think outside the box of conventional policy practices!
- **Gender inequality** has long been ignored in policy discussions.
 - Policymakers and the public should be more aware of **women's status change** and how our societies have not been able to adapt to their new roles and life choices.
 - A slowdown of family formation that is not necessarily caused by a lower marriage intention, but often by **disappointment and frustration** from fighting against an unfriendly and discriminatory system that is not supportive of women's autonomy and aspirations.
 - The La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth (2019-2030) advocated by APEC emphasizes gender equality outside the home (i.e., education, health, employment), more policies need to be put forth to **incentivize men's participation in care work** and to **diversify/liberalize their role expectations towards women, motherhood, and wifehood.**