Old Age in the Land of the Rising Sun: What Japan's Aging Population Means For Its Future

In the rural countryside of Japan, an elderly woman walks alone along a path lined with silent, smiling dolls dressed in children's clothing. These dolls aren't just decorative – in many of these towns, there are no children left. The ratio of young and old people is growing more and more disproportionate in many countries, threatening the global economy and raising concerns about both the near and distant future. Japan, in particular, is most imminently facing a demographic crisis, and those following behind are watching closely. An island country with one of the longest life expectancies in the world and one of the lowest birth rates, along with a history of aversion to immigration, Japan is set to shrink dramatically unless they take action now. If they are able to prevent a crisis, Japan has an opportunity to positively change their conservative society, preparing them for a progressive future and setting up their people to thrive long past this turning point. Although the global shift of aging population is a significant challenge for the country of Japan, it also offers to provide opportunities if they can commit to striving for technological innovation and gender equality.

The most prominent challenges created by Japan's aging population include the issue of labor shortages and an unsteady economy. The ratio of retirees to new workers is disproportionate, creating concerns about maintaining the country's spot as a major global economy and generating enough revenue to support the ballooning elderly population. This means that many of Japan's biggest industries don't have the manpower to continue at the current rate of production (Jack). Since developing technology able to support such a high number of

elderly people is paramount, a labor shortage could threaten the ability to manufacture products essential to their wellbeing. The elderly could also cause an economic shift towards less profitable industries out of necessity, requiring a solution that either introduces more workers or makes existing jobs easier. Solutions like adding more hours to the work week simply aren't viable, considering how overworked Japan already is. Their best bet is focusing on the development of automation and assistive technology now, before the looming crisis hits hardest. This will benefit both their workers and the economy as a whole, since “by deploying technologies to address societal challenges that arise from its extreme demographics, Japan is poised to be a leader in global markets” (Kushida). Advancements like more efficient industrial robots and effective harnessing of artificial intelligence will shift the burden off the shoulders of workers, as well as guarantee Japan’s continued spot as a powerful global economy. Additionally, the struggle to find enough workers could be lessened by dismantling one cultural norm – allowing women in the workforce.

Gender equality is one of the main things being threatened by Japan’s aging population, and it is often the most overlooked. The country has the opportunity to create a purposeful shift towards equality and the autonomy of women, instead of moving backwards in an attempt to combat demographic changes. In order to “address the issue of falling birthrates, women’s reproductive rights are now being targeted. The movement of having more babies could lead to a ban on abortion and reproductive choices” (Leonard). In Japan’s desperation to combat the birth rate crisis, they have to be careful not to pin the blame on women. Focusing on economic issues and achieving gender equality, rather than preventing it, is the most promising path forward the country can take. If more women are living in stable financial situations with access to resources

and support, they will be far more motivated to have children. Although a fairly high percentage of Japanese women are employed, many quit their jobs after marriage or childbirth, and the majority are working either part time or very low paying jobs. Research has demonstrated that closing the gender gap in Japan's workforce would counter shortages and boost GDP by 13 to 15 percent ("Japan"). Creating more opportunities for women to enter the workforce would be a massive step towards solving both the issue of labor shortages and the stagnant birth rate. Currently, the only thing holding Japan back from such a beneficial change is their own desire to cling to antiquated cultural expectations. Promising better lives for women is not simply a solution to a problem – it is a necessary step to ensure a prosperous and equitable future.

Although Japan is facing a potential social and economic crisis, they have a variety of ways to prepare that may end up setting an important precedent for other aging countries. For one, focusing efforts on developing assistive technology for both workers and the elderly will improve quality of life for everyone, as well as prevent damage to the economy. Additionally, they have the opportunity to kill two cultural birds with one stone by allowing women into the same high paying jobs as men. The idea that being a mother and working full time cannot coexist is outdated, and only persists because of Japan's resistance to change. Knowing they have a stable future would certainly encourage women to have more children, rather than taking away reproductive rights in an effort to force higher birth rates. Investing in their people first and foremost will ensure that Japan can recover from their population deficit and continue to thrive far into the future. It's time for Japan to transition into a new era of global leadership – both technologically and socially.

Works Cited

Jack, Dallin. "The Issue of Japan's Aging Population." *Chicago Unbound*, U of Chicago Law School, 2016, chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=international_immersion_program_papers. Accessed 6 Mar. 2025.

"Japan Introduces 'womenomics' to Counter the Country's Aging Workforce and Boost GDP." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2025, www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-global-economy/case-studies/japan/. Accessed 10 Mar. 2025.

Kushida, Kenji. "Japan's Aging Society as a Technological Opportunity." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 Oct. 2024, carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/japans-aging-society-as-a-technological-opportunity?lang=en. Accessed 7 Mar. 2025.

Leonard, Abigail. "Could Japan's Shrinking Population Lead to Shrinking Rights for Women?" *Newsweek*, 18 Mar. 2016. *SIRS Issues Researcher*, explore.proquest.com/sirsissuesresearcher/document/2266031839?accountid=2422.