

## Feminism as a trigger for change in the dynamics of Danjyo Kankei and the unmarried trend in Japan

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### Article Information

Submitted: 2024-08-06

Revised: 2024-11-04

Published: 2024-12-16

### Abstract:

In the Japanese patriarchal system, the male head of the household holds absolute decision-making power, and women are expected to obey all such decisions. The unmarried trend is also widely experienced by men, not only by women. This study aims to analyze how the introduction of feminism has transformed the dynamics of Danjyo Kankei (gender relations) and triggered the unmarried trend in Japan. A qualitative approach was employed, using primary data from Japanese government statistics and secondary data from the literature. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns of feminism, gender relations, and the unmarried trend. The study reveals: (1) The unmarried trend in Japan has intensified, marked by a delay in the age at marriage, a high proportion of the single population, and a decline in birth rates due to changing social values, economic pressures, and rising individualism. (2) Feminism has transformed Japanese gender relations from ie patriarchy toward equality. Policies that strengthen women's economic independence have enabled women to freely choose unmarried status as a form of autonomy and resistance. The study concludes that the transformation of gender relations and the unmarried trend in Japan are interrelated as outcomes of feminist change. Feminism deconstructs ie patriarchy through education and economic independence, making unmarried status a rational strategy in response to economic pressures and gender inequality. This study reinforces feminist constructivism by demonstrating that patriarchy operates through cultural, economic, and familial mechanisms, and emphasizes the importance of structural policies and more equitable, autonomous spaces for individual life choices.

### Keywords:

Japan; Danjyo Kankei;  
Feminism; Unmarried.



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### To cite this article (APA Style):

Nisrina, A. D., Devi, R. S., Surayya, D. P., Tias, R. N., Turnip, G. E., & Prakoso, S. G. (2024). Feminism as a trigger for change in the dynamics of Danjyo Kankei and the unmarried trend in Japan. *An-Nisa' Journal of Gender Studies*, 17(2), 91-104. <https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v17i2.306>

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## INTRODUCTION

Before the development of feminism, patriarchy was an established cultural system in many countries, including Japan, through the concept of danjyo kankei, which positioned men as the central holders of power. This cultural system emphasized distinct gender roles, in which men dominated economic, social, and political spheres, while women were largely confined to the domestic domain. Within the family structure, all decisions were made by men as the heads of households, whose authority had to be obeyed (Crabtree & Muroga, 2021; Hamasaki et al., 2023). Women's education was also oriented toward learning how to care for husbands and raise children (Anisa & Ikawati, 2021; Anisah Hasan & Irwan, 2015), thereby limiting women's roles to the household. This condition was reinforced by Confucian teachings (Nugroho et al., 2022). Thus, danjyo kankei can be understood as a systematic and institutionalized manifestation of patriarchy in Japan prior to the emergence of feminism.

Previous studies have extensively examined feminism in Japan and can be classified into three main strands of inquiry. First, post-World War II feminism transformed Japan's patriarchal system through the expansion of civil and political rights, as well as gender equality for women (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 1947; Matsui, 1990; Lukyantseva, 2023a; Fukuda et al., 2020). Second, labor reforms in Japan prohibited wage discrimination and strengthened women's access to economic equality in the workforce (International Labor Organization, 1947; Sakina & A., 2017; Bullock et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2020; Martin, 2021). Third, constructivist feminism has encouraged Japanese women to enter the public sphere; however, they continue to face the burden of double domestic responsibilities (Sidani, 2005; Mutiah, 2019; Abera et al., 2020; Khuseini, 2018; Raymo et al., 2021). Overall, previous studies have largely focused on women's rights and labor participation. The novelty of the present study lies in linking feminism to the unmarried trend as a form of autonomy and resistance, as well as its implications for Japan's demographic and economic conditions.

The objective of this study is to analyze how the influx of feminist thought has transformed the dynamics of danjyo kankei and triggered the unmarried trend in Japan. Based on these findings, the research questions are formulated as follows: (1) how does feminism transform the patriarchal structure in Japan, and (2) how do women's independence through the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and shifts in social values influence the decision not to marry and contribute to the emergence of the unmarried trend in Japan? The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it shifts the perspective from viewing unmarried status as a demographic problem to understanding it as a form of rationality and a survival strategy. Second, it integrates constructivist feminist analysis with demographic and economic data. Third, at a practical level, this study provides a basis for public policy that not only promotes marriage but also respects women's autonomy and fosters an inclusive social ecosystem for single living.

This study is based on the argument that the transformation of danjyo kankei in Japan is the result of a long-standing struggle between the patriarchal ie-based system and Confucianism, and the feminist movement that emerged as a counter-hegemonic force. Feminism has gradually deconstructed women's subordination through three strategic pathways: education, economy, and politics. Access to education has shifted women's orientation from merely ryōsaikenbo (good wife, wise mother) to independent agents. Economic independence through the Equal Employment Opportunity Law has reduced dependence on men. Political and reproductive rights have provided women with control over their bodies and public participation. Ultimately, Japanese women increasingly choose an unmarried lifestyle (ohitorisama) as a form of rational resistance to deeply rooted

patriarchy. This trend should not be interpreted as a social pathology, but rather as an affirmation of personal autonomy and a survival strategy in response to structural inequality.

## METHODS

### *Research Approach*

This study employs a qualitative approach. According to Sevilla-Liu (2023), qualitative research is a process that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words derived from the behavior of research subjects, with an emphasis on individuals and their contexts in a holistic manner. This approach aims to interpret phenomena experienced by the subjects, such as activities, behaviors, and perceptions, and to describe them in narrative form to achieve a very deep understanding of specific natural settings (Bazen et al., 2021). Thus, qualitative methods allow researchers to capture rich, contextual insights into the studied social phenomena.

### *Data Sources*

The selection of data sources in qualitative research serves as an initial basis for constructing arguments and information; therefore, the ability to determine appropriate types of data sources significantly influences the data obtained (Justesen et al., 2021; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). This study employs two types of data sources. Primary data are obtained from Japanese government websites that present year-to-year statistics on declining marriage rates, as well as official documents from relevant organizations, such as the Statistics Bureau of Japan, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, which provide annual data on marriage rates, age at first marriage, and the proportion of the unmarried population. Secondary data are derived from literature studies, including journals, articles, and research reports related to feminism, gender relations (danjyo kankei), and unmarried trends in Japan from various credible sources.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis employed thematic analysis to examine the unmarried trend in Japan. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of themes emerging from the data (Cotton et al., 2024). The process included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The main themes examined were the periodization of feminism, the transformation of Japanese gender relations (danjyo kankei), and the dynamics of the unmarried trend (ohitorisama). Each theme was further developed into sub-themes and analyzed based on causal relationships and the socio-cultural context of Japan (Jowsey et al., 2021). This approach enabled a systematic interpretation of qualitative data and supported the identification of meaningful patterns across sources, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

### *Data Validity*

Data validity in this study was ensured through source triangulation, which involves comparing primary data from official Japanese government websites (Statistics Bureau of Japan, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and National Institute of Population and Social Security Research) with secondary data from academic journals and literature related to feminism, gender relations, and unmarried trends. In addition, documents were reviewed repeatedly and consistently to ensure information reliability. This technique enables the researcher to verify findings across multiple sources, thereby obtaining a comprehensive and scientifically accountable understanding.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

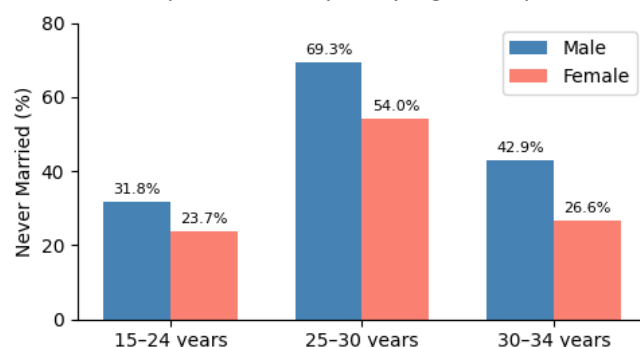
### Results

#### Dynamics of the unmarried phenomenon in Japan

Shifts in social and economic values in modern Japan have transformed public perceptions of marriage as an institution. Many individuals, particularly the younger generation, prefer to focus on careers, personal freedom, or financial stability before making marital commitments. As a result, marriage rates have declined significantly, while the number of single individuals continues to increase, creating a new demographic pattern that warrants further attention.

**Figure 1**

*Unmarried Population in Japan by Age Group*

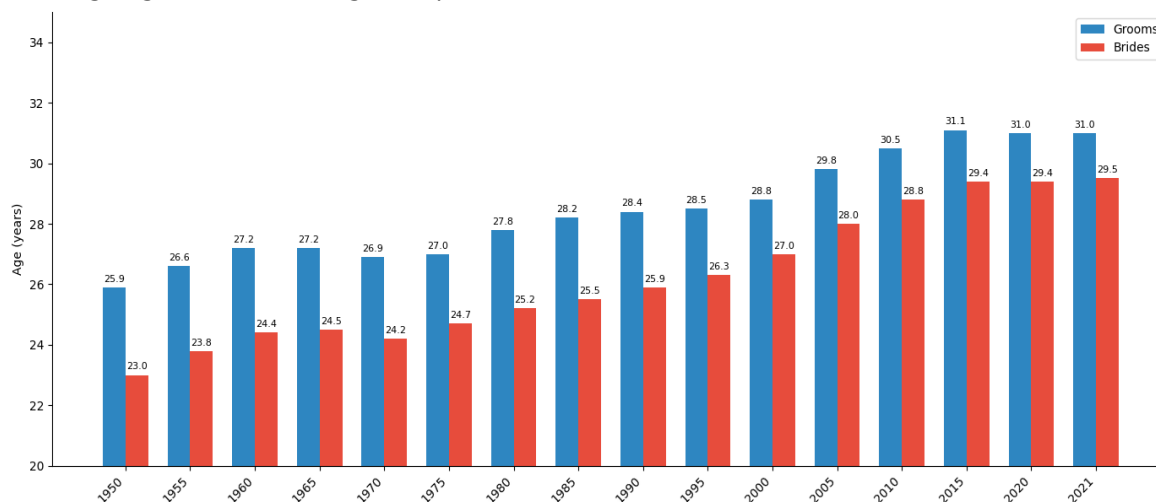


Source: Processed by the authors, 2024.

Figure 1 illustrates a notable pattern in the unmarried trend in Japan across age groups. In the 15–24 age group, the proportion of unmarried individuals is relatively high, at 31.8% for males and 23.7% for females, which is expected as most individuals are still in education or beginning their careers. A significant increase occurs in the 25–30 age group, where 69.3% of males and 54% of females are unmarried, indicating a substantial postponement of marriage. In the 30–34 age group, the proportion declines to 42.9% for males and 26.6% for females, suggesting that a large proportion eventually marry within this age range. However, the figure remaining above 40% for males indicates that approximately one-third of the population remains single into their mid-30s, reinforcing the increasingly entrenched unmarried trend.

**Figure 2**

*Average Age at First Marriage in Japan*

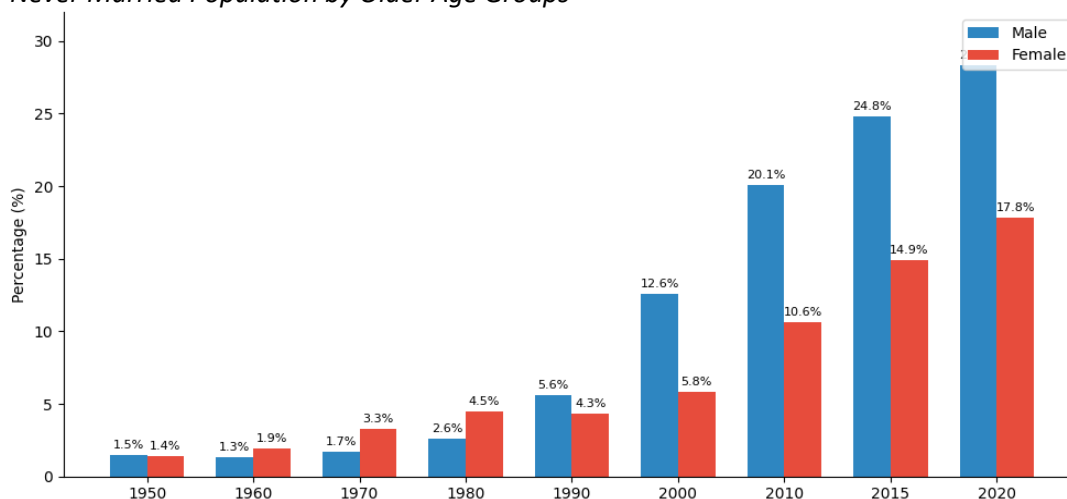


Source: Source: Processed by the authors, 2024.

Figure 2 shows a consistent increase in the average age at first marriage in Japan from 1950 to 2021. In 1950, the average age at first marriage was 25.9 years for men and 23.0 years for women. This figure increased gradually until the 1980s, followed by a more pronounced rise starting in the 1990s. By 2000, the average age had reached 28.8 years for men and 27.0 years for women. The upward trend continued, reaching 31.0 years for men and 29.5 years for women in 2021. Overall, over the past seven decades, the average age at first marriage has increased by approximately five years for men and 6.5 years for women, reflecting a significant shift toward later marriage.

The findings indicate that the age at first marriage in Japan has steadily increased over the past seven decades. In the mid-twentieth century, the average age at marriage was relatively young. This upward trend progressed gradually until the 1980s, after which it accelerated more markedly from the 1990s onward. The pattern has continued into the present period, reflecting a cultural shift toward later and more deliberate marriage. The increase in the age at first marriage is more pronounced among women than men. This phenomenon is closely associated with broader socio-economic changes, including rising female participation in higher education and the labor market, as well as transformations in traditional values concerning marriage and family in contemporary Japanese society.

**Figure 3**  
*Never Married Population by Older Age Groups*



Source: Source: Processed by the authors, 2024.

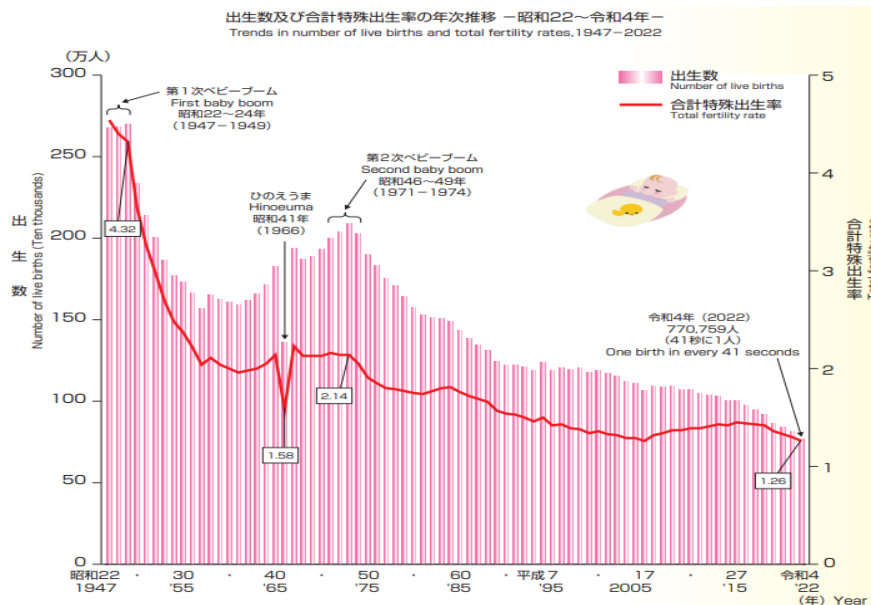
Figure 3 shows a dramatic increase in the proportion of individuals remaining unmarried up to the age of 50 in Japan from 1950 to 2020. In 1950, the rate was very low, at only 1.5% for men and 1.4% for women. Over the following three decades, the increase was relatively slow. Starting in 1990, a significant rise was observed, with the proportion reaching 5.6% for men and 4.3% for women. The most substantial growth occurred between 1990 and 2020, when the rate rose sharply to 28.3% for men (a fivefold increase) and 17.8% for women (a fourfold increase). Throughout the period, men consistently exhibited higher rates of lifelong singlehood than women, with the gap widening to more than 10 percentage points by 2020, reflecting profound changes in Japan's marriage institution.

The findings indicate a dramatic increase in the proportion of the Japanese population remaining unmarried by age 50 over the past seven decades. In the mid-twentieth century, lifetime celibacy rates were very low. The increase progressed slowly until the 1980s, followed by a more noticeable rise in the 1990s. The most significant surge occurred between 1990 and 2020, during which the rate increased fivefold among men and fourfold among women. Throughout the period, men consistently exhibited higher lifetime

singlehood rates than women, with the gender gap widening to more than ten percentage points. This trend reflects profound changes in the institution of marriage in contemporary Japanese society.

**Figure 4**

*Total Births 1947-2022*

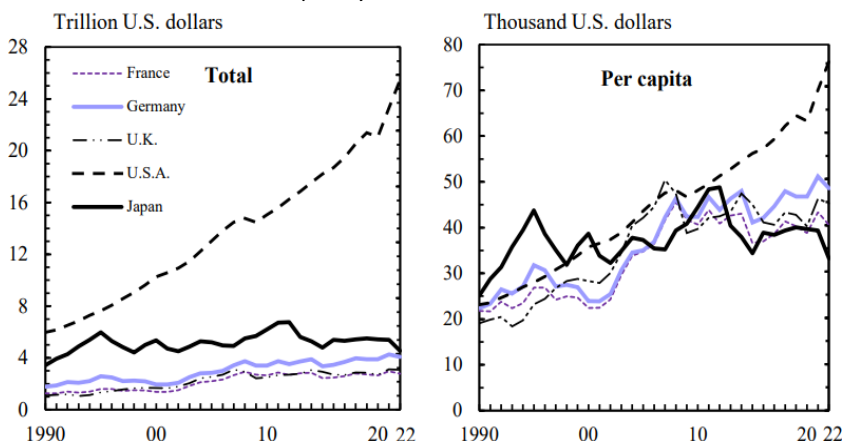


Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2024.

Figure 4 shows that the decline in marriage and birth rates in Japan has had a direct impact on the economy. The elderly population continues to increase, while the number of children declines, making economic growth increasingly difficult to achieve. A lower number of children results in a reduced future labor force. This situation also affects the fiscal system: tax revenues decline, while the demand for pensions and healthcare services for the elderly continues to rise. However, funding for these services depends on contributions from the productive-age population ([Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Tokyo, Japan, 2018](#)). In recent years, Japan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has also shown a declining trend. OECD data indicate that GDP continued to decline in 2020 up to the latest available data in 2022 ([OECD, 2022](#)). Thus, demographic and economic crises are occurring simultaneously.

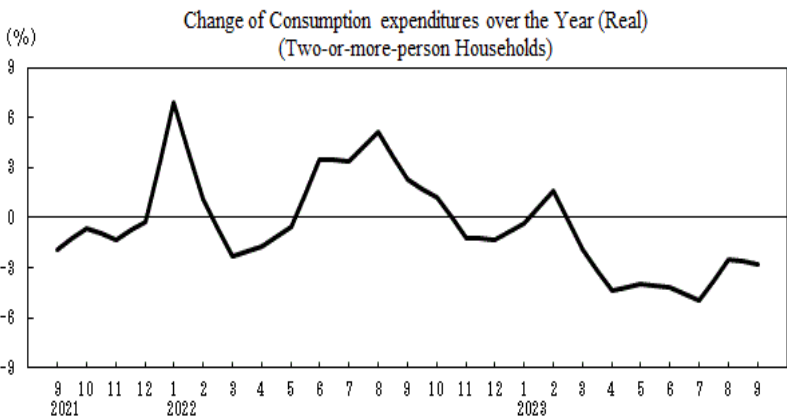
**Figure 5**

*Gross Domestic Product (GDP)*



Source: OECD, 2022.

**Figure 6**  
*Consumption Expenditures*



Source: Statistic Bureau of Japan, 2024.

The unmarried phenomenon in Japan has a direct impact on the decline in domestic consumption, as shown in the 2023 graph. Spending patterns of single individuals differ from those of families; they tend to save more and reduce expenditures on goods and services. As a result, demand decreases, companies reduce production, revenues decline, and labor absorption weakens. Domestic consumption, as the main driver of economic growth, is therefore weakened, leading to a decline in national income. The lack of family structures reinforces frugal behavior, which ultimately suppresses overall economic activity.

**The influence of feminism on the cultural dynamics of Danjyo Kankei in Japan**

Shifts in social values and gender relations in modern Japan have occurred at a significant pace. Various historical, cultural, and legal factors have shaped how women and men interpret their respective roles, responsibilities, and freedoms. These dynamics have gradually transformed societal perceptions of institutions such as marriage, education, employment, and political participation.

**Table 1**  
*The Influence of Feminism on the Cultural Dynamics of Danjyo Kankei in Japan*

| Main Theme                                                           | Sub-theme                                              | Findings Analysis                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Transformation of Gender Relations in Japan ( <i>Danjyo Kankei</i> ) | Transition from a matrilineal system to patriarchy     | The dynamics of <i>danjyo kankei</i> in Japan shifted from a matrilineal society that provided significant space for women to a patriarchal system based on <i>ie</i> and Confucianism, which positioned men as the central authority in domestic, economic, and political spheres. |
| Feminism and Women’s Educational Awareness                           | Access to education and changes in women’s orientation | Feminism has enabled Japanese women to gain broader access to education. Education, which was previously aimed at producing <i>ryōsaikenbo</i> (good wife, wise mother), has shifted toward a means for women to pursue careers, independence, and equal social status with men.    |
| Feminism and Women’s Economic Independence                           | Employment opportunities and economic equality         | The feminist movement and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1986 have expanded more equal employment opportunities for women. Women are no longer confined to domestic roles but can achieve financial independence and participate in the public sector.                     |
| Feminism and Political and Reproductive                              | Women’s political and reproductive rights              | Feminism strengthened women’s political position through the right to vote and stand for election after World War II. In addition, women’s movements also advocated for reproductive                                                                                                |

|                                                                          |                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Freedom</b>                                                           |                                          | rights, including access to contraception and decision-making rights regarding pregnancy and marriage.                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Feminism and Contemporary Changes in <i>Danjyo Kankei</i> Culture</b> | Gender equality and women's life choices | Feminism has transformed gender relations in Japan toward greater equality between women and men. Women now have greater freedom to determine their education, career, marriage, and the decision to remain unmarried as a form of autonomy and resistance against traditional patriarchal culture. |

Source: Source: Processed by the authors, 2024.

Table 1 shows that the transformation of gender relations in Japan (*danjyo kankei*) reflects a shift from a matrilineal system to a patriarchal structure based on *ie* and Confucianism. Feminism subsequently promoted women's access to education, shifting their orientation from merely *ryōsaikenbo* (good wife, wise mother) toward career equality and independence. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1986 expanded employment opportunities for women, thereby strengthening their economic independence. Feminism also advanced women's political rights after World War II as well as reproductive rights, including access to contraception. Ultimately, contemporary *danjyo kankei* culture has become more egalitarian, with women freely choosing an unmarried lifestyle as a form of autonomy and resistance against traditional patriarchy.

Based on the findings, the transformation of *danjyo kankei* in Japan has not occurred in a linear manner, but rather through a prolonged struggle between traditional patriarchal systems and the feminist movement. Initially, the *ie* system and Confucianism institutionalized the subordination of women within domestic, economic, and political spheres. Feminism emerged as a counter-hegemonic force that gradually deconstructed this structure through three main pathways: education, economy, and politics. Education shifted women's orientation from the ideal housewife role to independent agents. Financial independence through the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Act broke the chain of economic dependence on men. Political and reproductive rights provided women with control over their bodies and public participation. Ultimately, contemporary changes in gender relations have enabled women to choose an unmarried lifestyle as a form of rational resistance to persistent patriarchy, as well as an affirmation of personal autonomy.

## Discussion

Studies on changes in gender relations (*danjyo kankei*) and the unmarried trend in Japan identify two main findings. First, the unmarried trend in Japan has increased, as indicated by the postponement of marriage, a growing proportion of individuals remaining single into older age, and declining birth rates resulting from shifts in social values, economic pressures, and the rise of individualism in modern society. Second, feminism has transformed Japanese gender relations from an *ie*-based patriarchal system toward greater gender equality. The 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Act strengthened women's economic independence, enabling them to freely choose an unmarried lifestyle as a form of autonomy and resistance. Thus, changes in gender relations and the unmarried trend in Japan are interrelated as outcomes of feminism and broader socio-economic transformation. Women's autonomy and increasing individualism have weakened the *ie*-based patriarchal structure while simultaneously shifting marriage from a social obligation toward a more flexible life choice.

These findings are highly relevant to contemporary social issues in Japan, particularly the population crisis and economic stagnation. The Japanese government reports that the birth rate has declined to its lowest level in history, while the elderly population continues to

increase (Wulandari, 2015; Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). The same reports indicate that a large proportion of young men and more than half of young women remain unmarried, reflecting a shift in life priorities from family formation to careers and personal freedom (Maxson, 2018; Srivastava, 2020). This condition is further exacerbated by the rise of non-regular employment and post-pandemic economic uncertainty, which leads many young people to feel financially unable to afford marriage and child-rearing (Sassler & Lichter, 2020; Xinhua, 2022). Japanese society is now confronted with a dilemma between preserving traditional values and accepting the unmarried lifestyle as a new social norm.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the constructivist feminist perspective proposed by Locher (2001) and Kroløkke & Sørensen (2006), which argues that gender is a social construct functioning as a code of power. Patriarchy based on sexual difference, as explained by Brännmark (2021) and Gupta et al. (2023), has been institutionalized through the ie system and Confucianism, positioning women in a subordinate role within the domestic sphere. Second-wave feminism in Japan has successfully deconstructed the traditional notion that women are only suitable to become *ryōsaikenbo* (good wife, wise mother), replacing it with an awareness of rights to education, career, and bodily autonomy (Shimizu, 1987; Matsuyama, 2022). Within this framework, the unmarried trend is not a social pathology but a rational response to persistent structural inequality (Zou et al., 2022; Yamada, 2024). Women choose to remain unmarried because traditional marriage no longer offers comparative advantages over financial independence and psychological freedom (Aranda et al., 2021; Wei, 2022; Lukyantseva, 2023b).

The study provides an understanding that social change cannot be imposed through policy alone but requires a transformation of collective consciousness. Feminism in Japan demonstrates that when women are granted equal access to education and economic opportunities, they naturally begin to question norms that are detrimental to them (Molony, 2018; Kridahl & Duvander, 2023). This study shows that statistical data often only captures the surface; behind unmarried figures lie psychological burdens resulting from family pressure, fear of domestic violence, and exhaustion caused by double sexual standards (Hastings & Schneider, 2021). The *ohitorisama* phenomenon is not a form of egoism but rather a survival strategy within an incompletely equitable system (Faison, 2018; Ghaznavi et al., 2022). The key lesson is that gender equality is not an end, but a pathway to expanding dignified life choices for all individuals (Arvin et al., 2021; Ryll Tokyo, 2022).

This study aligns with Lesthaeghe's (2020) findings on the "second demographic transition" in developed countries, where delayed marriage and the rise of single living are characteristic of post-materialism. However, unlike studies in Europe that emphasize individualization factors (Buchmeier & Vogt, 2024), this research highlights the specific role of feminism in dismantling Japan's Confucian-based patriarchal structure. Carr & Utz (2020) found that individuals who remain unmarried into older age tend to experience social isolation; however, this study instead shows that many Japanese women report greater happiness and freedom in singlehood. This difference indicates that cultural context significantly shapes the meaning of being unmarried. Compared to Smock & Schwartz (2020), who focus on economic aspects, this study adds psychological and historical dimensions, particularly how intergenerational patriarchal trauma shapes preferences for remaining single (Mitsuki, 2021).

Based on the study findings, three practical recommendations are proposed. First, the Japanese government should revise tax and social security policies that still favor families over single individuals, to avoid discrimination against unmarried life choices. Second, companies and educational institutions should implement gender-awareness training that

eliminates stereotypes portraying women as natural homemakers and should also provide equal parental leave for fathers. Third, civil society should establish safe spaces for individuals who choose to remain unmarried, such as psychological support communities and independent elderly care programs. In the long term, a national campaign is needed to redefine the concept of a “happy family” not only in terms of marriage, but also as a productive single life. These recommendations aim to create a social ecosystem that respects individual autonomy without triggering a demographic crisis.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that changes in gender relations (danjyo kankei) and the increasing unmarried trend in Japan are interrelated phenomena resulting from feminist transformation and socio-economic change. Feminism has successfully deconstructed the Confucian-based ie patriarchal system through women’s access to education, employment, and economic independence, thereby expanding life choices beyond traditional marriage. As a result, unmarried status should not be understood as a social deviation, but rather as a rational strategy in response to economic pressure, employment insecurity, and gender inequality. Critically, this phenomenon also reveals a contradiction between modernization and the stagnation of social institutions, where individual freedom simultaneously generates demographic challenges, including declining birth rates and an increasingly aging population in Japan.

This study contributes to strengthening feminist constructivist theory, which positions gender as a social construct closely linked to power relations. The findings expand the understanding that patriarchy operates not only at the cultural level but also through economic and family institutions that shape individuals’ life preferences. In practical terms, this research implies that population policies are insufficient if they focus solely on incentives for marriage or childbirth; instead, they must address structural aspects such as job stability, gender equality, and social protection. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive space of life choices, enabling both women and men to make family-related decisions with greater autonomy and dignity.

This study has limitations in its data coverage, which is largely based on macro-level statistics and historical literature, and therefore provides limited in-depth qualitative insight into the subjective experiences of unmarried individuals. In addition, the focus on feminism as the main variable may overlook other influencing factors such as digitalization, social media, and changes in online relational patterns. Future research should conduct longitudinal ethnographic studies of *ohitorisama communities* across different regions, including comparisons between metropolitan and rural areas. Intergenerational studies are also important to determine whether the unmarried trend will persist or reverse over time. Finally, comparative studies with other Asian countries sharing Confucian roots, such as South Korea and China, may further enrich understanding of the role of culture in shaping life choices.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the International Relations Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Sebelas Maret for giving us the opportunity to create and compile this journal article. Also, thank you to the author's friends who have set aside time and energy to conduct research to write this journal article.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

**Awalia Dhia Nisrina:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Writing Original Draft. **Rahma Sintya Devi:** Formal Analysis; Data Curation; Writing Original Draft. **Dina Pasya Surayya:** Formal Analysis; Methodology; Supervision. **Rahma Ning Tias:** Formal Analysis; Validation; Writing Review & Editing. **Grace Evelyn Turnip:** Methodology; Validation; Writing Review & Editing. **Septyanto Galan Prakoso:** Conceptualization; Visualization; Writing Review & Editing.

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