**Family Planning and Life Planning in Contemporary Japan: The “Pregnancy Activities” (*ninkatsu*) Phenomenon and Its Stakeholders**

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# Introduction

Policy measures aimed at increasing or decreasing the birthrate are a basic component of population policies in modern industrial states. For example, during World War II, the Japanese government sought to inspire citizens to raise large families with the slogan “Give birth and increase!” (Umeyo, Fuyaseyo)[[1]](#footnote-1) in order to be able to compete militarily with rival countries and fulfill imperialist goals (Schoppa 2008: 640ff.). In the postwar period, in contrast, the government had an interest in stronger population controls in order not to threaten the nation’s economic growth. Since the early 1990s, in the face of dramatically sinking birthrates, family planning has again become a central item on Japan’s social-policy agenda. The motivating factors are, above all, the problem of a society with an excessive number of aging members and related worries about the future of the pension system, infrastructure, and labor shortages (Schoppa 2008: 646). A variety of measures to increase the birthrate have been taken during this period (CAO 2015a).

The Japanese government’s current pronatalist strategies clearly differ from those of the war years. At that time, the Japanese empire was pursuing nationalist and militarist goals for the state’s benefit. Today, the policies and the discourse surrounding them are embedded in a different ideological framework, one that—reflecting the assumptions of liberal society—considers individuals as self-determined and independent. One area where this is particularly evident is in the rhetoric surrounding family planning. In a new set of policies developed in 2015 to counter the country’s low birthrate (see below; CAO 2015b), for example, the term “wish” (*kibō*) appears a total of twenty-three times in twelve pages, in formulations like, “making the wish to start a family come true” (*kazoku o kizuki* [. . .] *sono kibō o jitsugen suru*), “complying with individuals’ wishes” (*kokojin no kibō o fumaeta*),[[2]](#footnote-2) and others. The frequency with which the word “wish” is used suggests rhetorical means are being used to create a specific image of the individual and their role in society: pronatalist measures are justified not so much by emphasizing the goals of society as a whole, but by emphasizing the individual’s freedom and responsibility in view of his or her ideal life plan. This rhetoric, which is concerned less with the macrolevel of society than with the microlevel of the individual, is the subject of academic theories that deal with biopolitics and governmentality. The sociologist Nikolas Rose, for example, stresses that in contemporary information societies, strategies to regulate life and death are based on conceptions of the individual as autonomous and individualized (Rose 1996: 1). In neoliberalism, which is understood not only as an economic model but also as a “mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres” (Gill 2008: 442f.), the ideology of personal responsibility dominates. The sociologist Thomas Lemke (2014: 65) comments in this regard:

Individuals are expected to cope with social risks and insecurities, to measure and calculate them, taking precautions for themselves and their families. In this perspective it is entrepreneurial action, rational risk management, and individual responsibility that accounts for social success or failure.

In this ideological framework, then, individuals are responsible for their own destinies; overcoming societal obstacles and difficulties is a personal task.

I view the discourses that have arisen in contemporary Japan in connection with the term “activity” (*katsudō*) as positioned within this theoretical framework, understanding them as an expression of the emphasis on the individual’s personal responsibility. The terms used are generally compounds intended to suggest personal effort in the spheres of career, marriage, and family planning as part of what is considered an ideal life trajectory. Especially striking is the support for activities designed to attain a standardized model of life through the attainment of goods and services offered by the market. The most widely used term, dating back to the 1990s, is “job search activities” (*shūshoku katsudō*, abbreviated *shūkatsu*). It refers to activities undertaken by students in order to achieve a seamless transition to permanent employment after secondary school or higher education, a process that follows a standardized pattern in Japan. Much of it now takes place online, as a consequence of the expansion of modern information technology, and a well-defined business sector has developed around it (Tsunemi 2015: 17).

In 2008, the sociologist Yamada Masahiro[[3]](#footnote-3) and the journalist Shirakawa Tōko coined the neologism “active search for a spouse” (*kekkon katsudō*, abbreviated *konkatsu*) as an analogy to the phenomenon of active job searching. They argued in their book *The Age of the Active Search for a Spouse* (*Konkatsu jidai*), which appeared in the same year, that a clearly defined, socially acceptable life model that includes marriage can be achieved in Japan today only by making active efforts toward this goal and, for example, taking advantage of standardized services on offer (Yamada/Shirakawa 2008). The term “pregnancy activities” (*ninshin katsudō*, abbreviated *ninkatsu*) appeared a few years later, inspired by this linguistic usage. It refers to activities urged on young women in particular in order to impress on them the necessity of early life planning and “maintenance” of their own bodies for the purpose of pregnancy. In the background is the increasing risk of not being able to fulfill a potential wish for children in the future as women age.

In this essay, this discourse surrounding individual family planning is understood as a biopolitical one. “Biopolitics” is a concept widely used in the theoretical investigation of the “relationship between life and politics” (Folkers/Lemke 2014: 7) and was originally introduced by Michel Foucault in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* to designate the power that “had assigned itself the task of administering life.” According to Foucault, this power is wielded along two poles: on the microlevel, “disciplines of the body,” and on the macrolevel, “regulations of the population.” The latter, which targets reproduction and rates of birth and death, among other things, is also described as “a biopolitics of the population.” The two poles are not to be understood as independent from each other, however, but rather as “linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations” (Foucault 2014: 134f.).

The most important goal of biopolitics in contemporary Japan is to halt the decline in population. For this purpose, specific “technologies” in Foucault’s sense of that term are deployed in conformity with the socioeconomic structure and modern neoliberal ideas about the individual’s role in society. Two characteristic factors of these technologies are especially relevant and will be analyzed in this article. First, a central role is played by “knowledge” and “information” made available to individuals to enable them to shape their life and family planning according to their “wishes” (*kibō*). Rose’s explanation of the importance of expert knowledge—“Expertise comes to be accorded a particular role in the formulation of programs of government and in the technologies that seek to give them effect” (Rose 1996: 156)—is relevant in this context to the extent that the discourse about family planning in today’s Japan stresses the individual’s freedom of choice and autonomy, but the full exercise of that freedom and autonomy is possible only with the provision of expert knowledge, as in the measures against the low birthrate.

Second, the participants in these biopolitical strategies, whom I refer to in the context of this article as the stakeholders must be seen broadly, as not only political agents directly transmit information and expert knowledge. The term “stakeholder” refers to a group or individual with a particular interest in the progress or final result of a process or project. Although the original meaning of “stake” is an investment, the stakeholder’s interest is not necessarily rooted in a financial or material investment in contemporary usage. It is an economic term that I have deliberately chosen to use here in order to emphasize the profit-oriented context of the discourse about family planning. On the one hand, the interests at stake are found at the state level in the realm of population policy. On the other hand, however, the private economic interests of businesses, drug companies, and other representatives of the healthcare sector active in the constantly growing reproductive-technology market must also be considered. In addition, the interests of media actors, whether as channels for the dissemination of information and discourses or as profit-seeking enterprises, play an important role.

In this article, I analyze the contemporary discourse on family planning that has developed around the term “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*). My goal is to investigate the concrete biopolitical strategies that have arisen in response to Japan’s demographic crisis, with a focus on the following questions: Which stakeholders, representing which interests, participate in this discourse in contemporary Japan? How do these strategies concretely express the neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility in connection with biopolitical technologies centered around knowledge and information? How are gender roles portrayed in this discourse? The methodological basis for this examination is a narrative analysis of policy measures to increase the low birthrate, publications targeted to young women on the topic of “pregnancy activities,” and qualitative expert interviews[[4]](#footnote-4) I conducted with representatives of particular stakeholders in Tokyo in 2015.

I will first discuss the new strategy of disseminating information on the topics of “pregnancy” and “birth” in the policy measures against the low birthrate (section 2). I will then turn to the *ninkatsu* phenomenon fostered by the media, which pursues the same line of discourse (section 3), after which I will analyze this narrative on the basis of two relevant media examples (section 4). Finally, because the problem of aging eggs is of central importance both in the policy measures and in the *ninkatsu* discourse, I will address it again independently by analyzing a television documentary on the subject (section 5).

# Information and Knowledge as Measures against the Low Birthrate

Because the ideology of the family is deeply rooted in Japan, and the family continues to serve as a social safety net, but ever fewer people in Japan (are able to) fulfill the ideal of marriage and children,[[5]](#footnote-5) there is a discrepancy between wish/ideal and reality. Research on marriage behavior shows that the declining number of weddings is due less to changes in values related to marriage and gender roles than to the precarious economic conditions for men and women resulting from the rise in irregular and insecure employment (Schad-Seifert 2006: 35). The situation is made more difficult by, among other factors, deeply anchored structural conceptions of gender roles found throughout the social and family system (for example, the model of the male breadwinner) and by the inadequate welfare system, which continues to rely on companies as a social network, despite the declining number of permanent employees, and on women’s unpaid time for family caregiving (Schoppa 2006: 2). Public spending on young families is also very low in Japan compared to other countries (Adema et al. 2014: 52). The prerequisites for a society in which everyone can raise children “with a feeling of security” (*anshin suru*), the goal stated in numerous government documents (CAO 2004: Internet; CAO 2015b: Internet), are consequently not met.

The government’s current catalog of policy measures, published in 2015 under the title *Outline of the Measures against the Low-Birthrate Society* (*Shōshika Shakai Taisaku Taikō*; henceforward: *Outline*) and revised every five years, does mention the labor market’s structural problems, but the narrative is conspicuously reliant on neoliberal rhetoric that revolves around self-determined, individual life planning and individual freedom of choice in family planning.

The 2015 *Outline* is also the first to mention the provision of information and knowledge about reproduction and family planning as an important factor in countering the low birthrate. Alongside the social aspect of reproduction, its physiological side is given a great deal of importance. The passage reads as follows:

In order to fulfill one’s life plan (*raifudezain*) according to one’s own wishes in the future, including marriage, pregnancy/birth, and raising children, correct knowledge and information are an important prerequisite. It is necessary to build a system ensuring education and the provision of information concerning medically and scientifically correct knowledge about pregnancy and birth and encompassing school, family, community, and individual members of society. Especially in the school context, this correct knowledge should be incorporated into curricular materials. (CAO 2015b: Internet)

This brief excerpt from the *Outline* makes clear that the Japanese government considers “correct knowledge” (*tadashii chishiki*) an important measure against the low birthrate. Even the prime minister at the time, Abe Shinzō, ascribed great importance to providing knowledge about fertility and reproduction. This is all the more surprising because as recently as the early 2000s, when he chaired the Project Team to Investigate the True Situation of Excessive Sex Education and Gender-Neutral Education (*Kagekina Seikyōiku/Jendā Furī Kyōiku ni Kansuru Jittai Chōsa Purojekuto Chīmu*), Abe was highly critical of sex education and gender-neutral educational methods in schools and, together with others with similar views, instigated a “bashing campaign against sex education” (*Seikyōiku Basshingu*).[[6]](#footnote-6) This project team judged the sex education provided in schools to be “excessive” (*kageki*) and characterized it as a threat to the Japanese family and Japanese society (Takamura 2006: 132). Yet more than a decade later, at an August 2015 meeting of the budget committee of the upper house of the legislature on the topic of “measures against the low birthrate,” Abe stressed the need to “provide medically and scientifically correct knowledge about pregnancy and birth in schools and disseminate it to all members of society.” This was an important prerequisite, in his view, to “creating a society in which every individual can fulfill their wish for marriage and planning for children” (KGKS 2015: Internet).

This strategy of disseminating information, highlighted by Abe, had already been the focus of much effort since 2013, given that late marriage and the consequent increase in women’s age at first birth were seen as a major reason for the decline in births.[[7]](#footnote-7) Education about the risks of a late birth is consequently a central goal of measures for contending with the low birthrate. For example, the information team of the Task Force on Overcoming the Crisis of the Lack of Children (*Shōshika Kiki Toppa Tasukufōsu*), established in March 2013, was concerned with the dissemination of information on reproductive matters. Its first major project was the *Handbook on Life and Women* (*Inochi to josei no techō*), referred to as the *Women’s Handbook* (*Josei techō*). This was intended for distribution to young women starting in their teens to provide them early on with knowledge about pregnancy and especially about the limited span of childbearing age. There was a great deal of resistance from many directions, however, and, as a consequence, the project ultimately could not be implemented (Soshiren 2014: Internet). Nevertheless, the content was disseminated in other forms, such as in the supplementary curriculum for secondary school students produced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) under the title *To Lead a Healthy Life* (*Kenkōtekina seikatsu okuru tame ni*). In one version, four of forty-five pages are devoted to the topics of “family planning” and “pregnancy,” with special emphasis on the connection between fertility and the woman’s age (MEXT 2015: Internet). However, this curriculum has come under heavy criticism because of falsified data and one-sided content, as revealed by the Association to Promote the Discontinuation of the Use and Distribution of the Supplementary Health Curriculum for Secondary School Students (*Kōkō Hoken Fukukyōzai no Shiyō Chūshi Kaishū o Motomeru Kai*), among others(Fukukyozai 2015: Internet; HPJ 26.05.2013: Internet).[[8]](#footnote-8)

In view of the evident efforts to educate the population on reproductive matters, the question arises of why the responsible parties are convinced that “correct knowledge” (*tadashii chishiki*) is in short supply and, at the same time, consider it an important prerequisite for increasing the birthrate. The answer to this question leads to one of the chief themes of this article: the entanglement of various stakeholders and their interests in the discourse on family planning.

First, we should take examine more closely the background behind the assumption that people in Japan know too little about reproductive processes, fertility, and pregnancy/birth. Specifically, found among the details in the 2015 policy outline mentioned above is the statement that the “share of correct knowledge” should be increased from 39 percent to 70 percent. As the document’s footnotes reveal (CAO 2015b: Internet), the figure of 39 percent, cited here as quantitative evidence for the problem of the Japanese population’s lack of knowledge about reproductive processes, comes from an international study on knowledge about fertility (Bunting et al. 2013). The article cited is based on a study conducted in 2009 and 2010 by Merck Serono,[[9]](#footnote-9) a leading biopharmaceutical company headquartered in Darmstadt and a world leader in reproductive technology, in collaboration with Cardiff University. This international study, named “Starting Families” and aimed at acquiring “insight into [. . .] decision-making around fertility and fertility-treatments,” surveyed a total of about ten thousand men and women around the world who wished to have children (MS 2010: 2). The study showed, among other things, that in comparison to survey subjects from other countries with a very high HDI (Human Development Index), the Japanese survey subjects appeared to have strikingly little knowledge about the subject of “fertility”; specifically, only 39 percent of the questions were answered correctly (Bunting et al. 2013: 392).[[10]](#footnote-10) But the questions that served as the basis for this determination of the percentage of individuals with “correct knowledge” were devoted exclusively to the connection between fertility and factors such as age, weight, and sexually transmitted diseases (Cardiff Fertility Knowledge Scale; MS 2010: 10; Bunting et al. 2013: 397), not pregnancy and birth in general, as indicated in official Japanese government documents. This—thoroughly misleading—result thus provides the foundation for the new policy’s aim of focusing more strongly on educating the population on topics related to fertility and reproduction.

Nevertheless, this starting point for the policy measures combatting the low birthrate is not entirely new. The supposedly deficient knowledge of the Japanese, shown by the study mentioned above, is similarly emphasized in a media discourse that will be subjected to closer analysis in the next section.

# The “Pregnancy Activities” (*ninkatsu*) Phenomenon and Its Origins

Before politicians began to identify information and knowledge about the biological process of reproduction as an important factor for increasing the birthrate, already, beginning in 2011, a discourse had become prominent in the media that had a pattern of argumentation similar to the strategy of information dissemination laid out above: the discourse about *ninkatsu*. The *Large Digital Dictionary* (*Dejitaru Daijiten*) defines the term as follows: “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*) are “the acquisition of knowledge about pregnancy, comprehensive preventive healthcare, and active life planning that includes pregnancy and birth” (Dejitaru Daijiten 2015: Internet). Before delving into this discourse and its content in more detail, I will first sketch its origins.

As early as 2009, Merck Serono set up the website ninkatsu.net with the goal of providing education about reproductive technologies. According to its self-description, the website is intended to appeal to “women taking positive action toward pregnancy” (*ninshin ni maemuki ni torikumu josei*) and support them in their life and family planning by providing “correct knowledge and information about the health of the female body and psyche” (*josei no karada to kokoro no kenkō ni kansuru tadashii chishiki to jōhō*; MS 08.02.2011: Internet). Even though it was only in 2011 that the term “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*) and the concept formulated on the website became well known to the public, there was already talk of a “*ninkatsu* boom” that same year (NKS 13.11.2011).

This boom was triggered by a strategically deployed campaign by Merck Serono, which I will briefly describe. The first large-scale media debut of the term “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*) took place in 2011 in the form of a special issue of the magazine *FRaU* entitled “*Ninkatsu* Startbook” (FRaU 2011). The target audience of this lifestyle magazine is working women between twenty and thirty-nine years old. In an interview I conducted in 2015 with the former deputy chief editor, it became clear why this magazine played such an important role in the marketing of this discourse. The inspiration for this special issue focused on subjects related to pregnancy and birth was apparently a visit from a Merck Serono representative, who presented the data from the Starting Families study, mentioned above, to Kodansha, the largest publishing house in Japan and *FRaU*’s publisher, in 2010. The result was a decision to market the subjects “pregnancy,” “birth,” and “fertility” on a large scale, together with the drug company, under the term “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*). The magazine special issue was developed as the first step, and in the same year, a so-called “*ninkatsu* meeting” was jointly organized (MS 22.06.2011), where Saitō Hidekazu,[[11]](#footnote-11) a doctor specializing in fertility treatments, was an invited guest alongside well-known show business personalities (FRaU 2011: 45).

Although it is emphasized that “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*) include much more than just fertility treatments (Saitō/Shirakawa 2012: 18), these treatments are nevertheless a central topic within the discourse. In the “*Ninkatsu* Startbook,” nineteen out of one hundred pages are exclusively devoted to this subject (FRaU 2011). Among other things, a variety of products are promoted, as well as Merck Serono’s informational website ninkatsu.net, mentioned above, but without mentioning the company by name. The term “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*), which Kodansha and Merck Serono officially trademarked (INPIT 2017: Internet), spread quickly after the *FRaU* special issue was published and continues to be used today in a wide variety of media, including numerous books and advice manuals, as well as countless websites, blogs, and communities that use this keyword on the internet. Its extensive dissemination in the mainstream media can also be seen in some of Japan’s largest daily newspapers. A simple keyword search[[12]](#footnote-12) in the complete digitized back issues of the newspapers *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (*Nikkei*) makes clear that the topic is reaching an increasingly large readership, as the following chart shows:

Figure 1: Occurrences of the term *ninkatsu* in four large Japanese daily newspapers.

In 2010, when Merck Serono’s ninkatsu.net website had already existed for a year (MS 2011b: Internet), the term *ninkatsu* was mentioned only once in *Asahi Shimbun*. This low rate of reference to the term changed beginning in 2011, parallel to the media campaign discussed above. A significant increase in mentions can then be observed from 2013 onward, enabling us to establish that Merck Serono and Kodansha’s *ninkatsu* campaign succeeded in spreading the use of the term and that the topics discussed within this framework have reached a wide target audience in recent years.

# The *ninkatsu* Narrative

In this section, I shed greater light on the rhetoric and specific content of the *ninkatsu* discourse by analyzing two relevant examples, the introduction to the first *ninkatsu* magazine (FRaU 2011) and excerpts from the so-called *Ninkatsu Bible* (Saitō/Shirakawa 2012). I first aim to analyze the rhetorical work done in the introduction to the “*Ninkatsu* Startbook” and show how it influenced the direction of the discourse from the outset. In the special issue’s opening spread, the question “What is *ninkatsu*?,” posed in English, receives the following lengthy answer:

You are always on the run, both at work and in your personal life. Or you haven’t yet found your life partner. But you definitely want to have children and become a mom someday. Very many women seem to have this wish. This book talks about what women who want children should know now. Women who are not (yet) married (*mikonjosei*) and women with a (postponed) wish for children (*mininjosei*)[[13]](#footnote-13) can find answers here to their questions and concerns about a future pregnancy and birth: “Am I physically capable of becoming pregnant?” “What can I do now to prepare myself in advance for pregnancy and birth?” “When do I report a pregnancy (to my employer; IF), and what exactly should I say?” “Can I work during pregnancy despite nausea?” “I imagine that the pains are terrible . . . Am I in a position to give birth to a child?” “I’m worried about gaining a lot of weight with birth.” “What should I do if I can’t find a day-care slot?” “Can I combine a career with raising a child?” And many more. There is no end to such questions and concerns, but after a lot of research, we at *FRaU* have compiled the things that you would like to know now for the future. Considering the trend toward late marriage (*bankonka*) and the limited period of fertility with a cool head, acquiring correct knowledge, actively and foresightedly making provision for a future pregnancy (or pregnancies), thinking it over, and acting accordingly: we mean to refer to all of this together as *ninkatsu*. (FRaU 2011: 4)

The quotation allows us to draw conclusions about both the content and the target audience of the *ninkatsu* discourse. The target audience is unambiguously young women who are successful in their careers and harbor the wish to become mothers but see themselves as facing a number of obstacles and difficulties in fulfilling that wish.

It is especially striking that the focus is on insecurities and fears related both to the social environment and to one’s own body, insecurities and fears that the women addressed are supposed to overcome through their own efforts and skillful planning. Macropolitical or societal problems that make potentially planning for children more difficult or even impossible are not highlighted. Rather, problems at various levels are to be tackled and solved individually. As the text is from a women’s magazine, the focus on a female readership is not surprising. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the man’s role in the topics of “reproduction” and “raising children” is scarcely mentioned. The woman is thus presented as the driving force in and the one primarily responsible for the topic of planning for children. This tendency is found throughout the discourse.

For a more detailed view of the narrative, we now turn to an advice manual with the title *Ninkatsu Bible* (*Ninkatsu baiburu*) and the subtitle *Life Planning for Women in Times of Late Marriage and Declining Births* (*Bankon, shōshika jidai ni ikiru onna no raifupuranningu*). The authors are Shirakawa Tōko (see above) and the doctor Saitō Hidekazu (see above). The book is aimed at young women and was published in 2012, also by Kodansha. The authors argue that a wish for pregnancy and birth can no longer “automatically” (jidōteki; Saitō/Shirakawa 2012: 18) be fulfilled as an established part of the course of a young woman’s life, as in Japan’s times of economic growth, but, rather, now requires the active creation of the conditions for fulfillment. In the introduction, after briefly discussing societal factors that make family planning more difficult, Shirakawa writes: “The body will not wait until society changes. People decide their own futures. I would like you to acquire knowledge, plan your life, and have children despite the contrary circumstances” (Saitō/Shirakawa 2012: 4). The authors identify “four obstacles that must be overcome” (*koenakereba naranai yottsu no hādoru*) if a woman wishes to have children: the question of “how a body capable of giving birth is maintained” (*umeru karada o dō mentenansu shite iku ka*), “marriage” (*kekkon*), “personal matters such as career/economic power and support from one’s partner” (*shigoto ya keizairyoku, pātonā no kyōryoku to iu jibun no shūi no mondai*), and “infertility” (*funin*). In order to overcome these obstacles, a woman can no longer wait for her destiny as earlier generations did. She must, it is repeatedly stressed, “consciously decide in favor of a child” (*ishi o motte sazukaru*; Saitō/Shirakawa 2012: 18f.). The necessity of acquiring knowledge about social and physiological factors and developing a life plan early is emphasized as the first prerequisite. To disseminate this idea among as young an audience as possible and sensitize them to this topic, Saitō and Shirakawa also offer lectures based on the *Ninkatsu Bible*’s content under the title “Career, Marriage, and Birth: Life Planning (*raifupuraningu*) for University Students and Early-Career Employees” (Saitō/Shirakawa 2015). In an interview I conducted with the authors (June 2015), both emphasized that these lectures are addressed to young men and young women alike. Nevertheless, the description “for female university students” (*joshi gakusei no tame*), which is still to be found in many places (for example, on the title page of Shirakawa’s official blog), indicates that the target audience is primarily female.

Such lectures have been delivered at the University of Tokyo, Keio University, and Waseda University (Shirakawa 2015). In addition, the content was reconceived in 2014 as a textbook entitled *Textbook on the Topics “Having Children” and “Working”* (*“Umu” to “hataraku” tame no kyōkasho*; Shirakawa/Saitō 2014) in order to make it accessible to secondary school students.

Both authors are also politically involved. Shirakawa has acted as an adviser on policy measures to combat the low birthrate, serving as a member of the research committee for the development of the current policy outline, for example. For his part, Saitō chaired the government-sponsored Task Force on Overcoming the Crisis of the Lack of Children (Shōshika Kiki Toppa Tasukufōsu) from 2013 to 2014 and continues to have major influence on the content of the government’s policies as a task force member. Saitō’s goals and motivation are made clear in his “message of encouragement” (*ōen messēji*) entitled “The Right Time for Pregnancy and Birth Is between Twenty and Thirty: Women and Men Need to Think about Their Life Planning,” found on the Cabinet Office website:

The majority of female patients who come to my center for (fertility) treatment are in their late thirties. It’s different for each individual, but starting treatment between your early twenties and your midthirties vastly increases your chances of ultimately holding a baby in your arms. I’ve been involved with fertility treatments for many years, and I’ve often heard, “I didn’t know that the ideal age for a pregnancy is between twenty and thirty. I would have liked to know that earlier.” That’s why I would like more people to know the facts about the right time to have children, and that’s why I do educational work. (CAO 2015c: Internet)

The rhetoric of the *ninkatsu* discourse and the combination of roles played by the participants reveal the interplay of actors from the media, the pharmaceutical industry, and politics. It is also clear that freedom of decision and individual autonomy are repeatedly invoked as arguments. Because all the stakeholders are unmistakably aiming at higher numbers of births or economic profits, however, we can only speak here of a “normative dimension of autonomy” (Rasmussen 2011: chapter 2, section 1, paragraph 4). The one-sided focus on the woman and her body, already noted in the preceding analysis, will be further explored in the next section through an analysis of a television documentary and its reception.

# The Woman’s Body in Focus—Aging Eggs

The preceding examples have already made it clear that insecurity about reproduction can be caused not only by the social situation but also by physical factors. The woman’s advanced biological age as a risk factor when planning for children is a particular focus both in politics and in the media discourse on knowledge about fertility. Japanese society’s interest in the egg aging process has increased greatly in recent years as the result of a documentary on this subject. On Valentine’s Day 2012, the public television station NHK’s well-known program *Close-Up Gendai* (Contemporary close-up), which deals with contemporary social phenomena, broadcast an episode entitled “The Unfulfilled Wish for Children—The Shock of Aging Eggs” (“*Umitai no ni umenai—ranshirōka no shōgeki*”; NHK 14.02.2012: Internet). The report, produced very much in the style of an exposé, begins with the soundtrack of two forty-something women being asked on the street until what age it is possible to bear children. The first woman answers with an uncertain laugh, “That should really work fine until about fifty years old,” after which the second, who appears more certain, responds, “Through the progress of medicine, we hear more and more often about women who still bring children into the world after the age of forty.” However, the program’s narrator suggests in his commentary that these women have fallen victim to an erroneous belief widespread in Japan’s highly developed society:

Women between their early thirties and their late forties who seem to remain eternally young. We believe that we can stay young forever if we put in the effort. But there is one thing we cannot stop: aging eggs. This is said to be a cause of infertility, but there are countless people who hear about this fact for the first time when they undergo fertility treatment.

A thirty-five-year-old woman wearing a wedding ring, her appearance altered to conceal her identity, poses the problem: “For thirty-five years, no one around me ever told me this. I was only instructed about contraceptives.” The commentator continues, “Without knowing about aging eggs, ever more women devote themselves to their careers until forty. Or they have undergone more than twenty of in vitro fertilization cycles. Or they let their fertile years slip away while they are busy with their jobs.” In the next cut, a forty-four-year-old woman says, her voice distorted, “I would be so glad to have my eggs back from the time when I was still young.” The program then shows statistical data, such as the fact that one in six couples undergo fertility treatment. After that, the subject is more deeply explored through interviews with doctors renowned in the area of reproductive medicine. Although it is briefly mentioned that infertility can have a wide variety of causes and does not have to be only due to the woman, aging eggs are nevertheless very clearly depicted over a total of forty-five minutes as the greatest danger for individual family planning. The ignorance of the (female) population and the great personal harm that results are emphasized. From this, the necessity of disseminating this knowledge on a large scale is once again deduced. In general, it is noteworthy that men do not seem to be taken into consideration in connection with either natural or artificial reproduction. Men appear in the program only as doctors or as employers who should encourage their female employees to plan early for children. There is also one husband who is worried about his wife, who is suffering greatly as a consequence of unsuccessful fertility treatments. Individuals who are in a position to pursue proactive life planning on the basis of knowledge about the connection between age and female fertility are encouraged to do so early, so as not to suffer regrets over their childlessness later, like the women shown on the program.

It is reasonable to suppose that this program had a great deal of influence on the public discourse about the issue of the limited time period for female reproduction. In a second simple keyword search of the complete digitized back issues of four large daily newspapers (see above), the number of articles in which the term “aging eggs” (*ranshi (no) rōka*) was mentioned in the title or the main text increased significantly in the year after the broadcast.

Figure 2: Occurrences of the term *ranshi (no) rōka* in four large Japanese daily newspapers.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The program’s rhetoric, which underlines women’s ignorance and also seems to identify this, at least, indirectly, as the reason for the decline in births, is less critical of the social circumstances that make it difficult or impossible for young women to start a family. Rather, women themselves are blamed for their childlessness, because they postponed their own wish for children out of ignorance. Whether knowledge alone enables women to plan their lives more flexibly and according to their own wishes, however, remains open to question. The fact that men are scarcely mentioned also strengthens the impression that women are solely responsible for planning for children.

# Personal Responsibility and Information as a Way out of the Birth Crisis?

In summary, this essay’s analysis had led to the following findings: First, the connections linking the various stakeholders and their interests in the discourse on family planning in contemporary Japan are clear. The fact that the media discourse considered here was stimulated as a marketing campaign by a multinational company with the help of Japan’s largest publishing house already shows that in the context of today’s Japan, a biopolitical analysis that limits itself exclusively to policy measures is insufficient. The narrative of autonomy and self-determined life planning must be viewed with skepticism against the background of this discourse’s origin and the interests of the groups involved. Few would dispute, for example, that stakeholders whose primary goal is profit see the individual less as an autonomous being than as a potential consumer. It is thus surely not an exaggeration to classify the *ninkatsu* discourse as a marketing strategy that is not primarily aimed at strengthening the individual’s autonomy with regard to life planning.

In addition, I would like to consider the problem of personal responsibility, which is an important central term in the context of the discourse studied. The early acquisition of knowledge, as we have seen repeatedly, is defined both in the media and in the political sphere as a precondition for proactive, autonomous life planning. The (female) individual is urged to overcome societal obstacles by exercising personal responsibility. However, this depiction gives rise to criticism from two perspectives in particular. First, it apparently ignores structural problems and existing social inequalities in the population on the basis of gender, origin, or social class. Political decision-makers evade their responsibility to counteract these existing conditions, which are essential factors for flexible family planning and hence for policies combatting the low birthrate, and transfer it to the individual. This does make the individual aware of the risks of late or unsystematic family planning; without improvement in the social and economic conditions, however, it does not create the possibility of more flexible family planning. Second, the individual’s much-praised freedom and ability to choose are evidently to be found only within a specified framework. Very specific rules must be followed in order to plan for a family and children in a socially acceptable way. Freedom of choice is also subject to limits to the extent that only specific information and limited knowledge—that is, knowledge that serves the broader societal goal of a growing population or the economic goals of the pharmaceutical industry—is offered. As this article’s analysis makes clear, the information offered in connection with “pregnancy activities” (*ninkatsu*) is not pure “medically and scientifically correct knowledge” (*igakuteki, kagakuteki ni tadashii chishiki*), as Abe insisted in September 2015 (see above; KGKS 2015: Internet), but is rather positioned within the framework of a discourse shaped in accordance with the interests of the stakeholders involved.

Regarding how gender roles are presented, it is notable that on both the political and media levels, the discourse is addressed almost entirely to young women. The additional absence of any male involvement in family planning in the discourse replicates the ideology of the traditional maternal role. Especially in the context of aging eggs, the woman’s body is placed at the center of the discourse on family planning and also of the problem of the low birthrate. Motherhood is presented as biologically ordained. Ignorance and egotism (for example, a woman concentrating on her career) appear to be the only reasons for a childless life model among women.

Using the discourse on family planning in Japan as an example, this article’s development of a perspective on contemporary biopolitical technologies that extends beyond the political sphere is intended to contribute to further discussion and research in those social sciences concerned in either a general or a Japanese environment with demographic phenomena and their sociopolitical causes and implications, including in the context of gender studies.

1. The document that laid out these measures was the “Program for Determining Population Policy” (“*Jinkō Seisaku Kakuritsu Yōkō*”) adopted by the cabinet in 1941. It set a goal of reaching a population of one hundred million citizens by 1960 for the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (IPSS 1941). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quotations from Japanese are translated by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Japanese names are written in the order used in Japan (surname, given name). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. At the time of writing, I had conducted a total of fifteen interviews with experts directly or indirectly involved in the formation of the *ninkatsu* discourse, including medical professionals working in the area of reproductive technology, authors/journalists, and representatives of nonprofit organizations. They were chosen as representatives of the different stakeholders on the basis of their media presence, among other criteria. The goal of the interviews was to obtain information about the background of the formation and origins of this discourse, as well as to enable a deeper analysis of it. In this article, I will deal only peripherally with a selection of the interviewees. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marriage and reproduction are closely linked in Japan. Only 2 percent of children are born out of wedlock, and only about 6 percent of married couples remain childless. According to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research’s fourteenth study of birth trends (IPPS 2010b: Internet), the fertility rate of women who had been married between fifteen and nineteen years was 4.27 in 1940, 2.2 in 1972, and 1.96 in 2010. The share of couples without children was 6.4 percent in 2010, compared to 3.0 percent in 1977. It can consequently be observed that most couples still have children and almost all births take place within marriage. Nevertheless, the percentage of the population that remains unmarried has increased significantly. Data from 2010 indicate, for example, that 35.6 percent of men (8.5 percent in 1980) and 23.1 percent of women (5.5 percent in 1980) between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine are unmarried (MIC 2010: Internet), many of them apparently unwillingly, as other data suggest: only 6.8 percent of unmarried women and 9.4 percent of unmarried men indicated in 2010 that they were not seeking marriage (IPPS 2010a: Internet). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As a consequence of this effective media campaign, deep cuts were made in the content of the sex education prescribed by the Japanese education ministry (MEXT 2005: Internet). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare’s population statistics, women’s average age at first birth increased from 29.9 to 30.1 between 2010 and 2011 (CAO 2012: Internet). The average first-time mother was consequently over thirty years old. The fact that the dissemination of knowledge and information on reproduction and birth/pregnancy is given great importance in government policies and that the media and the pharmaceutical industry are increasing concerned with this subject must be understood against this background. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a more detailed account, see Nishiyama/Tsuge (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This company has operated under the name Merck Biopharma since October 2015. In this article, I use the name in effect at the time the study was carried out, Merck Serono. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The sociologist Tanaka Shigeto’s (01.06.2016) critical analysis of the survey’s methodology has found serious errors in the Japanese translation of the questions, which, among other things, calls into question the accuracy of the results. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A gynecologist with a specialty in infertility and reproductive medicine and deputy head of the center for perinatal medicine of the National Center for Child Health and Development in Tokyo. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Content search of the full text and headlines for the term *ninkatsu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Author’s note: see the term in Kawai (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Years when the term did not occur are omitted in the chart. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)