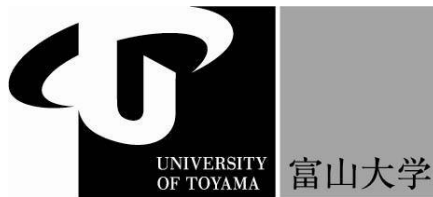


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**Why is marital partner search in depopulated  
areas difficult?: Findings from the comparative  
interviews in urban and rural areas in  
Toyama Prefecture**

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# Why is marital partner search in depopulated areas difficult?

## —Findings from the comparative interviews in urban and rural areas in Toyama Prefecture—<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

This article will investigate the mechanisms that make it difficult for single Japanese men in depopulated areas to find a marriage partner. We will use comparative interviews conducted in an urban area and a rural (depopulated) site in the Toyama prefecture in Japan.

Japan is one of the countries which suffer from a dwindling birth rate. Its birthrate was as low as 1.30 in 2021 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2022). In Japan, the declining birthrate and aging population are progressing rapidly, and countermeasures against the declining birth rate have become an important policy issue since they may affect the basis of the social security system and future local and national economic development in Japan. The total fertility rate has been on a long-term downward trend since 1973, although there were temporary small rebounds in recent years. The government implemented various policy measures against the declining birth rate, but the long-term trend toward a declining birth rate remains. Furthermore, COVID-19 accelerated this downward trend.

The postponement of marriages or the non-occurrence of marriages is the primary cause of the declining birth rate in Japan (Iwasawa 2014). In Japan, very few births (about 2%) occur between unmarried people. Thus, if fewer Japanese people are getting married, fewer Japanese people are giving birth. Thus, difficulty in a marriage partner search can lead to a decline in the birth rate in Japan. According to Iwasawa (2014), there had been no significant major change in the fertility rate among married people.<sup>2</sup> A study of over-time changes in the number of children already born to wives close to the completion of childbirth shows that there has been a slight decrease since the 1960s but no significant changes. Thus, the decline in the first marriage rate can mainly explain the decrease in the fertility rate.<sup>3</sup> In other words, an increase in the number of people who do not marry (rather than a decline in the birth rate of married couples) incurred the declining birth rate.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the rate of single people in a relationship is low, making it difficult for marriages

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1 This is a very preliminary version. Please do not cite without permission.

2 However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the married birth rate is also currently declining, especially among the younger generation (Japan Research Institute 2022).

3 According to factor decomposition using a model that explains the age-specific fertility rate by the proportion of married persons and the couple's fertility rate by the duration of the marriage, about 90% of the decline in the total fertility rate from the 1970s to 2012 can be explained by the decline in the first-marriage rate.

4 On the other hand, it is said that the fertility rate of married people in Japan has remained relatively stable (Iwasawa and Mita 2005, etc.). However, the number of births among married couples is also on the decline.

to occur, and this trend is more pronounced for men in depopulated areas (Sasaki 2015). So, why do single men in depopulated areas have trouble finding a partner? In this paper, based on the interviews conducted in two regions with different population densities, we explore the mechanism which deters unmarried people's partner search in a depopulated area. This paper mainly focuses on single men's partner search in the depopulated area.

In this paper, we focused on District D<sup>5</sup> in Toyama Prefecture, a depopulated area (non-densely populated district, or hereafter "non-DID"), and we focused on a marriage partner search for single men. Also, for comparison, we conducted interviews in the central area of Toyama City, a densely inhabited district (hereafter "DID") within the same Toyama Prefecture. We use these interview data to investigate what hinders single men's partner search in non-DID.

## 2. Previous research

### 2.1 Hypotheses on fluctuations in the occurrence of marriage

What makes people remain unmarried? Two factors are involved in fluctuations in marriage (the supply and the demand) (Iwasawa and Mita 2005; Nakamura and Sato 2010; Sasaki 2015).

The demand for marriage refers to the individual's desire to get married (Iwasawa & Mita 2005; Nakamura & Sato 2010; Sasaki 2015). Such willingness to marry is related to cost. The increase in the cost of marriage (including opportunity costs) and the decrease in the benefits of marriage lead to the decline in the individual's need to marry (Higuchi and Abe 1999; Takayama et al. 2000; Iwasawa and Mita 2005). There is also an imbalance in the division of household chores. The percentage of Japanese men who share housework is meager compared to other developed countries. Therefore, in many cases, women have to take full responsibility for housework and childcare, which makes the cost of marriage high, leading to a decline in demand for marriage on the part of women (Ogawa 1994; Tsuya 2000; Iwasawa and Mita 2005).

On the other hand, the supply is also a factor that affects the occurrence of marriage. When the supply of marriage partners is low, marriage becomes difficult no matter how strongly an individual desires to marry. When the population gap between men and women of suitable age is large, there is a marriage squeeze for the more populated sex (Glick et al. 1963; Iwasawa and Mita 2005). In addition, not only the male-to-female ratio of the population in terms of simple numbers but also whether there is a supply of "desired marriage partners of the opposite sex" is essential for the establishment of marriage (Oppenheimer 1988; Schoen 2003; Iwasawa and Mita 2005). In other words, it does not mean that any person of the opposite sex is fine, but that an individual does not want to get married

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<sup>5</sup> "District D" stands for "depopulated" district.

unless they find someone who suits the qualities they seek. In the case of Japanese women, while women are becoming more highly educated, their preference for "marrying up" remains unchanged, so the supply of highly educated men suitable for highly educated women is running out, and the number of unmarried people is increasing (Raymo and Iwasawa 2003; Iwasawa and Miota 2005). In other words, not only the supply of the numbers of the opposite sex is not sufficient. The supply of the opposite sex that suits the qualities they seek matters. Such a mismatch in conditions of marriage between a man and a woman becomes an obstacle for a marriage to occur (Oppenheimer 1988; Schoen 2003; Iwasawa and Mita 2005).

In addition, this "supply" also includes the element of the "pathways" or opportunities to meet potential marriage partners. Even if there is a potential partner in the same district, if there are no "pathways" or opportunities to connect the one to the potential partner, he is still unable to meet a partner. Such "pathways" include workplaces, schools, and matchmakers, which allow partners to meet. Iwasawa and Mita's (2005) factor analysis using data from the Basic Survey of Birth Trends showed that the declining availability of such "pathways" can explain the large percentage of decline in first marriages in the past 30 years in Japan. The decrease in arranged marriages explains about 50% of the reduction in the first marriage rate over the past 30 years. The decline in opportunities to meet at or through the workplace explains about 40% of the decrease. <sup>6</sup>

In this way, the demand for marriage and the supply of partners can explain Japan's decline in the first marriage rate. However, regional differences in mate search opportunities, especially between DID and non-DID, have yet to be sufficiently investigated.

## 2.2 Regional differences in partner search conditions

There are regional differences in the mate search situation of single people. Here we review a few studies on regional-level factors.

Migration from rural to urban areas occurs when one proceeds to higher education or at the time of employment. Such rural-to-urban migration leads to an imbalance in the male-female ratio in non-DID and a marriage squeeze for those left behind (Masuda 2014; Sasaki 2014; Sasaki 2015). Many young people in rural areas move to urban areas for higher education or employment. Still, women are more likely to move out of rural areas because there are few job opportunities in their hometowns. In addition, men tend to remain in rural areas since they are heirs to the family (Sasaki 2014). As a result, in non-DID, the ratio of men and women in the young population is imbalanced, leading to an increase

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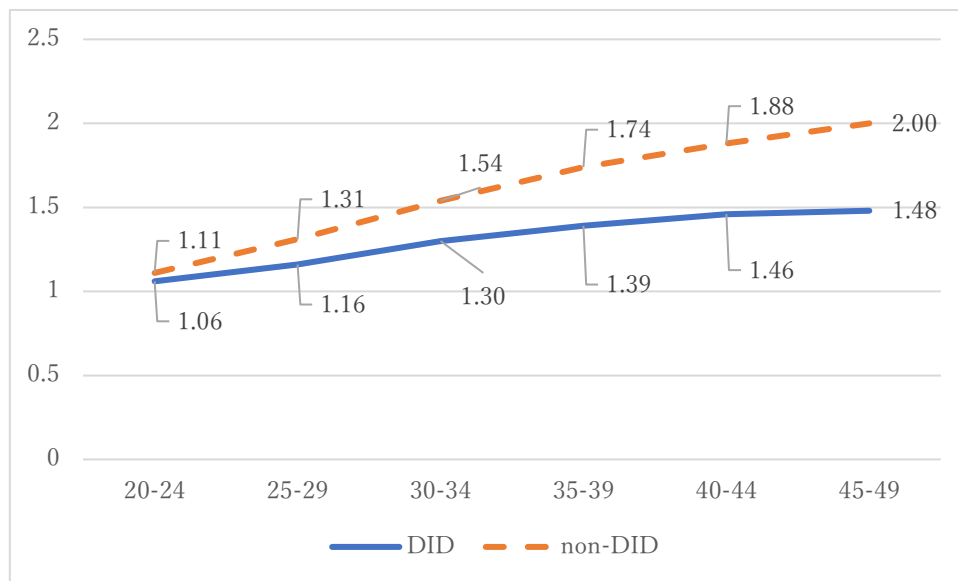
<sup>6</sup>One of the reasons why meeting through a potential partner at the workplace and arranged marriage match making has decreased is that the number of opportunities for introductions by superiors and relatives has decreased due to the heightened sense of privacy. In the old days in Japan, it was common for bosses to arrange marriage match for their subordinates. In the past, relatives and acquaintances introduced matchmaking partners. However, with increasing privacy awareness, such engagement is increasingly considered inappropriate and is no longer a common practice.

in the rate of staying single for men.

Based on population census data, figure 1 shows the male-to-female ratio (the number of males per female) in DID and non-DID areas. The male-to-female ratios are more significant for older age groups, and it's the gap in gender ratio more pronounced for non-DID.

In addition, Sasaki (2014) used JGSS2009 data to analyze the reasons for staying single for those between the ages of 28 and 42 by population size or region (major cities, small and medium-sized cities, and towns and villages). In towns and villages, the percentage of both males and females who answered that they had no partner (84% of men and 82.2% of women) was the highest (70.3% and 64.6% in large cities for men and women, 76.1% and 78.7% in small and medium-sized cities respectively). In addition, a high percentage of men and women who live in towns and villages answered that they had no chance of being in a relationship with someone (80.7% and 71.1% in towns and villages for men and women, 65.8% and 65.2% in large cities, and 65.0% and 69.5% in small and medium-sized cities, respectively).

**Figure 1: Nationwide male-female ratio by age group (the number of males per female, 2015)**



Note: Created from Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Population Census.

Furthermore, in Sasaki's analysis of factors that impede single men and women from finding a partner, men in non-DID do not have a romantic partner even if they are not picky about the qualities they look for in a potential marriage partner (Sasaki 2015). Men living in non-DID<sup>7</sup> tend not to have

<sup>7</sup>The definitions of densely inhabited districts (DID) and non-densely inhabited districts (non-DID) are as follows. Areas where "(1) as a general rule, basic unit wards with a population density of 4,000 or more per square kilometer are adjacent to each other within the borders of municipalities" and "(2) areas where the population of those adjacent

found a suitable partner regardless of their level of resources (educational background, annual income, employment status, living with parents), views on gender role ideology, and the qualities they seek in a partner.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in non-DID, even if their economic conditions are good and they are not selective in the qualities they look for in their future spouse, single men still have difficulties finding a mate. Two factors hinder a matching in a mate search: "the demand for marriage" and "the supply of partners." The "supply of partners" can be dissected into two elements: (1) whether suitable potential partners exist in the area and (2) whether there is a "pathway" or opportunities through which a person meets a potential partner (Iwasawa and Mita 2005). Such "pathways" can include matchmaking and introductions provided by neighbors, relatives, bosses, and colleagues at work, as well as educational and work settings where potential partners can meet.

If, in non-DID, one's resources and the qualities one seeks in a potential partner are not the reasons for those single men not finding a partner, then why do they have difficulties finding a partner? Unfortunately, existing studies have not investigated what regional factors hinder mating opportunities for single men in non-DID. In this paper, we conducted an interview survey to identify why single men in non-DID, compared to their counterparts in DID, find it challenging to meet a potential partner.

### 3. Target area and data

Toyama Prefecture, which is in the Hokuriku region, is a case in this study. The research targets were the urban (central area of Toyama City) and the depopulated area (District D)<sup>9</sup> in Toyama Prefecture. We conducted comparative interviews in the central region of Toyama City and District D.

#### 3.1 Interview Locations

##### Characteristics of Toyama Prefecture

Toyama Prefecture is in the Hokuriku region, located in the central north of the main island ("Honshu island"), and has a population of about 1 million, covering 2,428 square kilometers. Steep mountains (Hida Highlands, Ryohaku Mountains, and Tateyama Mountains) surround Toyama

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city limits is greater than or equal to 5,000 at the time of the most recent Population Census at the time of the survey" are defined as "densely inhabited districts". Other districts are defined as "non-densely inhabited districts (non-DID)" (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2022).

<sup>8</sup> In small and medium-sized cities, for instance, high-income men (5 million yen or higher) are three times more likely to meet the "right match" than average-income men. In addition, in large cities, men who live with their parents and who have a traditional view of the division of roles by gender tend not to be able to date "suitable partners". What is common to all regions is age, and the higher the age, the less likely unmarried people are to "date a suitable partner."

<sup>9</sup> We named this area where we conducted interviews "District D." It stands for depopulated district.

Prefecture. Toyama Prefecture has five large-sized rivers (grade one rivers), all rich in water supply due to the accumulation of snow in the mountains from which those rivers derive. This water resource and cheap electricity generated by hydroelectric power generated by dams built on those rivers have promoted the development of the manufacturing industry (Bank of Japan Toyama Office 2021; Nakamura 2021). According to the composition ratio of the prefecture's gross production by industry, the percentage of the secondary sector in Toyama Prefecture stands out. It includes the chemical industry, general-purpose/production/business-use machinery, non-ferrous metals, metal products, and electrical machinery.

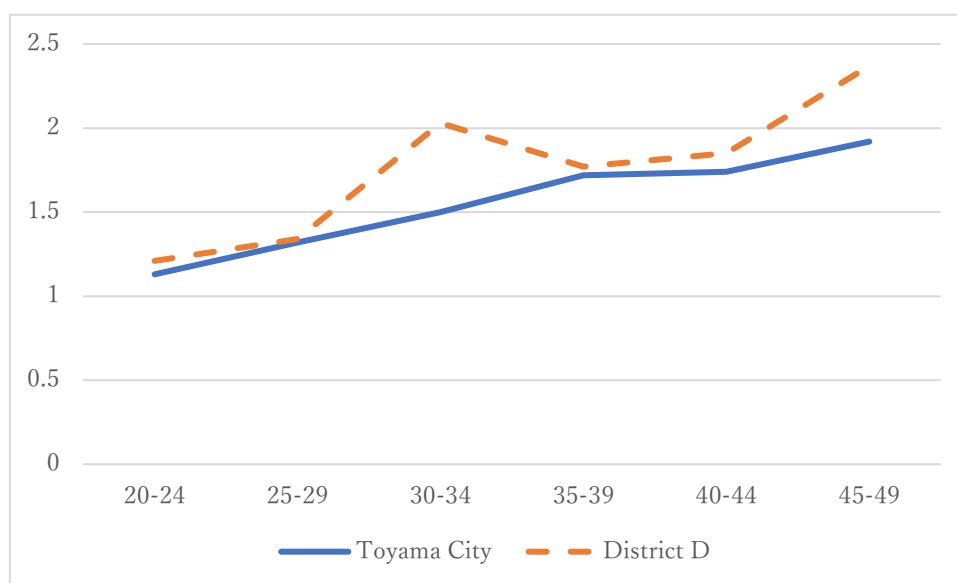
### Characteristics of Toyama City

Toyama City is the prefectural capital of Toyama Prefecture, which has a population of about 400,000, covers 1,242 square kilometers, and is the capital of Toyama Prefecture, where about 40% of the people of Toyama Prefecture live. Toyama City lies in the central southeast of Toyama Prefecture. The central part of Toyama City is DID, but most other parts are non-DID. The availability of public transportation in Toyama City also differs significantly between the city center and other areas. While various types of public transport, including its signature trams, are available, public transportation outside the central area is underdeveloped. Train routes are sparse, their frequency is scant on its outskirts, and automobiles are the most widely used transportation.

### Characteristics of District D

District D is non-DID, located on the outskirts of Toyama prefecture, close to the prefectural border. Its total population was about 10,000, covering about 200 square kilometers. It takes about an hour by car or trains from the center of District D to the central area of Toyama City, so commuting is possible. However, public transportation is not convenient. Only one train line goes to District D, and its service frequency is sparse, about one train per hour, except for rush hours. There are other means of public transportation, such as bus service, but their routes are sparse, insufficient to cover most of the area, and their service frequency is very sparse. Thus, in District D, automobiles are the means of transportation for most people.

**Figure 2: Gender ratio by age group in Toyama City and District D (the number of men per woman, 2015)**



Note: Created from Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Population Census.

Figure. 2 shows the sex ratio of single people (the number of men per woman) by age group in District D and Toyama City. The gap in sex ratio is more significant in District D.<sup>10</sup> Also, in the age groups of 30-24 years old and 45-49 years old, the number of men per woman is much higher in District D in Toyama City. The steep imbalance in the gender ratio suggests a marriage squeeze in those age groups.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2 Outline of interview survey

Below is an overview of the two interview surveys used in this research.

<sup>10</sup> One thing to note is that the statistics for the Toyama City in Figure 1 is derived from the average of the whole Toyama City area which includes depopulated areas within Toyama City. In Toyama City, there is a disparity between the densely populated area in the city center and the rest of the city. Thus, if you limit the statistics for central Toyama area, the male-to-female ratio gap would be smaller.

<sup>11</sup> The reason why those gender gaps for those two age groups is bigger still unknown and explanation remains hypothetical. In figure 1, the gap between non-DID and DID increases for older groups, single women tend to leave non-DID as they age, probably looking for a job outside of the area. Thus, same mechanism can explain why a bigger gap is observed for the age group of 45-49 in figure 2. For the age group of 30-34, they graduated at the bottom of economic cycle. Since local manufacturers limited hiring of women (as in the comment of Mr. C in the section 4.4), which probably led single women to leave the district for bigger cities where they can find a job.



## Interview with District D

- Survey target: District D, Toyama Prefecture (depopulated area) men and women in their 20s to 40s (single and married)
- The number of interviewees/ periods: 10 people. Survey period September to December 2015
- Survey method: Face-to-face semi-structured interviews (one interview by telephone).
- Survey content: About the situation of mate search in depopulated areas

The method of recruiting interview collaborators was 1) placing advertisements on the website of a free newspaper specializing in the region and 2) recruiting collaborators using the snowball sampling method. In December 2015, we conducted face-to-face interviews in District D (we interviewed one person by telephone). Table 2 summarizes the background of interviewees in District D.

**Table 1: Background of interviewees in District D**

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Occupation	Relationship status
Mr. A	Male	Late 30s	Unknown	Not in a relationship
Mr. B	Male	Late 20s	Self-employed	In a relationship
Mr. C	Male	Late 40s	Company employee	Not in a relationship
Mr. D	Male	Early 40s	Self-employed	Not in a relationship
Mr. E	Male	Late 40s	Company employee	Married
Mr. F	Male	Late 20s	Company employee	Not in a relationship
Mr. G	Male	Early 20s	Company employee	Not in a relationship
Ms. H	Female	Late 30s	Company employee	In a relationship
Ms. I	Female	Early 20s	Part-time worker	In a relationship
Ms. J	Female	Ealy 30s	Company employee	Not in a relationship

## Toyama City Interview

Survey target: Toyama City, Toyama Prefecture (urban area) Men and women in their 20s to 40s (single and married)

Number of interviewees/ periods: 10 people Survey period March to April 2016

Survey method: Face-to-face semi-structured interview

Survey content: About the situation of dating in Toyama city

Interview collaborators were recruited by placing advertisements in free papers specializing in Toyama City. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the center of Toyama City (University of

Toyama) from March to April 2016.

**Table 2: Background of interviewees in Toyama City**

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Occupation	Relationship status
Mr. K	Male	Early 20s	Student	In a relationship
Mr. L	Male	Early 30s	Company employee	Not in a relationship
Mr. M	Male	Early 30s	Company employee	In a relationship
Mr. N	Male	Late 30s	Self-employed	In a relationship
Mr. O	Male	Late 40s	Company employee	In a relationship
Ms. P	Female	Early 20s	Part-time worker	Not in a relationship
Ms. Q	Female	Late 20s	Part-time worker	In a relationship
Ms. R	Female	Late 30s	Part-time worker	In a relationship
Ms. S	Female	Late 30s	Self-employed	Married
Ms. T	Female	Early 40s	Part-time worker	Not in a relationship

#### 4. Analysis based on interviews

As described in Section 2.1, two factors can affect the occurrence of marriage: the demand for marriage and the supply of potential partners.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the shortage of the supply of potential partners may mean either 1) there are not enough single women in the area; 2) there are women in the area, but not enough women who have the traits those single men seek in a future spouse; or 3) there are women who have the traits they seek for as future spouse, but the "pathways" or opportunity to meet them is missing.

##### 4.1 Demand for Marriage

As described above, marital matching may be difficult because of the lack of "demand for marriage." Those single men in non-DID may not have partners due to their lack of interest in marriage. However, the lack of interest in marriage was not the case with those single men in District D or Toyama City. No interviewees stated they did not wish to get married in District D or Toyama City. As in Sasaki's study, there was no evidence that the demand for marriage was deficient in non-DID (Sasaki 2014, etc.). In this study, no one wanted to stay single and partner-free in District D and Toyama City, except for one in District D, who was in his late 40s (Mr. C). However, this has more to do with his age than the demographic characteristics of the area since he seriously used to have a

<sup>12</sup> The same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan, and therefore excluded from the current analysis.

strong desire to get married in his 30s.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the lack of demand for marriage may not explain those single men's difficulty finding a partner in non-DID.

#### 4.2 Supply of Marriage Partners – Unmarried Male and Female Population Imbalance

In District D, non-DID, interviewees repeatedly pointed out the underrepresentation of women, especially young women, in the area, which led to difficulties in a mate search.

[District D]

Ms. I: The elderly population in this District D has exceeded 40%, so there are no young people.

Mr. E: I don't know if there are young women. [...] There are no single women, and it's more like, 'Where is a young woman?'

We can see from the above comments that there are few young people in the first place, especially young single women. Thus, many single men cannot find a partner, not because he is picky in choosing suitable partners. The number of single women is sparse in the first place. If any, many of them are in a relationship already.

When the first author conducted the interview, she had difficulty finding single women in District D to interview. The author also had the opportunity to participate in a marriage matching event the local government held for the first time. Still, the event organizers had difficulty gathering enough female participants, while it was effortless to find male participants. Not only do the statistics show that there is acute gender imbalance for the single young people in District D, but also it was "felt" in day-to-day interaction.

[Toyama City]

In an interview in Toyama City (prefectural capital), no one mentioned the sparse supply of single women in the area as an obstacle to searching for a single man's mate. However, they admitted that mate search opportunities were limited if you compared them to the conditions in big cities like Tokyo.

Mr. M: Well. I think that if you narrow down the conditions and qualities you look for in your search, the number of women who fit those conditions will be very small [in Toyama]

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<sup>13</sup> Age is one of the factors that affect the demand for marriage (Sasaki 2015). As people age, their eagerness for marriage wanes.

[But] I honestly think it's up to you to decide whether to create opportunities [to meet someone]. It depends on how many such [matchmaking] events you participate in. The absolute number of single women is indeed smaller [in Toyama City compared to large cities], but in the end, you only need to find one woman to get married. You don't need many women since it's not polygamy.

Ms. Q: Opportunities to meet a potential partner is not limited to local matchmaking meetup and joint parties, and there are also many small events such as those on Facebook now. You can also go to a bar in front of the station, and there are various ways to meet people. So, there is no difference, even if you go to a metropolitan area [or stay here in Toyama City], regarding how you meet people. That's why I never thought there were fewer opportunities just because I live in a provincial city. It would be a different story though if you live in an out-of-the-way place with a very sparse population [then you will have less opportunity to meet people]. [But] I don't think we have less opportunity to meet people if we live in [the central area of] Toyama City.

Even in Toyama City, quite a few respondents answered that there were few opportunities to meet people due to its small population. But Toyama City respondents find the population size less problematic than their counterparts in District D. This is probably because Toyama City has a large population (more than 400,000). Moreover, many companies and schools are in the central area of Toyama City, where single women work and study. So, the marriage squeeze is not as acutely felt by its residents. Also, many matchmaking events help young people's mate search in Toyama City. Furthermore, a downtown area is in front of Toyama Station, so meeting someone at such bars is possible.

As Ms. Q aptly said, "It would be a different story though if you live in an out-of-the-way place with a very sparse population [then you will have less opportunity to meet people]." There is a decent number of young single women in Toyama City, which has a population of 400,000 (especially in the central area, a densely inhabited district). Therefore, they feel meeting someone is not so difficult.

Also, unlike District D, in Toyama City (center), even men can "choose" or be selective to some extent, as Mr. M stated. On the other hand, in District D, they said there are not enough young single women in the area, and none mentioned the lack of women who meet their criteria. Thus, the supply shortage occurs as the lack of single women who meet their standards in Toyama City, while it is the lack of "any" single young women in District D.

Also, the perceptions of the difficulty of mate search depend on the personalities and resources of the respondents. Younger people were more optimistic about finding a partner than older singles

(albeit with individual differences). Regarding mate search, men and women tend to be disadvantaged as they age (Sasaki 2015, etc.). Personalities and personal experiences help as well. Some people said that even living in a depopulated area, they can meet people if they make some effort (such as going to other regions or using social media). Another said a senior colleague at work taught him to pick up girls. The difficulties in mate search may depend on various attributes and resources. For instance, older and shy people may have more problems searching for their mates than others in those areas.

In addition, since early marriage is common in areas with small populations, those who missed the timing (such as finding a partner at school or in their early 20s) are left with difficulties. For example, in the interview, for those who missed the timing of early marriage, it became difficult for them to find a partner later. On the other hand, none of the interviewees in Toyama City stated that falling behind in early marriage hindered mate search.

[District D]

Mr. D: We marry early in the countryside, don't we? [Most] marriages happen much earlier [in District D] than Toyama City or Tokyo. The age we marry is polarized. I don't know the average age [of the marriage of my friends], but my school cohort got matched early. Most of them got married in their 20s. Many are also left behind. The marriage age gap is large [between those who marry early and those who are left behind]. They [those who are left behind] are, say, 38. In big cities, many singles are in their late 30s, and no big deal. But the situation in the countryside is different. Those who get married early get married. And those who left behind remain single as they age. Many of them are sweet and respectable, though.

#### 4.3 Network Density and Consciousness of Shame

In non-DID, where the network among its residents is dense, marriage search becomes difficult because they fear rumors from others. The respondents mentioned rumors as hindrances in District D and Toyama City. Also, there was a shared sense of shame for older single people to engage in mate searches.

[District D]

Mr. A: [In response to the author's question about whether there are any inconveniences in conducting a mate search in District D] For example, after two or three days at the latest, after you attend a matchmaking event, rumors start to spread in the neighborhood.

[...] A few years ago, there was a matchmaking party in District D, but when I told my parents I would attend, they begged me to stop. They said they would give me 10,000 yen if I stopped attending it. [...] Now, they've accepted that I'm doing a mate search, but at the time, they begged me to stop.

Mr. F: If you worry about the opinions around you, you won't be able to engage in mate search. Rumors circulate quickly. Rumors soon spread about who was where. It's a place with a small population, so there are acquaintances everywhere. The hostess of the snack bar that I would casually drop by would turn out to be a friend's sister, for example.

People take for granted that rumors spread quickly, and they seem to find many disadvantages. People were afraid of becoming the target of rumors, and many felt ashamed of being involved in marriage partner searches and didn't want others to know about it. The respondent and his parents feel embarrassed about the marriage partner search. In some cases, such as Mr. A, the parents asked their son to give up participating in a marriage matching party out of concern for rumors.

[Toyama City]

Fear of rumors due to the dense network and the sense of shame that accompany the marriage partner search are barriers to a mate search in Toyama City as well. However, some people, like Mr. O, pointed out regional differences even within Toyama City.

Mr. O: Well, rumors spread in Toyama Prefecture, especially in rural areas. They already knew when I told my colleagues that I was getting married. They would say they saw us together here and there, so they assumed it was a matter of time before we married. Well, one of my colleagues was in the same situation. Everybody knew. When he told us [about his plan for marriage], we told him all of us already knew. It doesn't bother me anymore, but I felt a little embarrassed when I was younger. It's like you want to hide it. It's like a secret.

In District D and Toyama City, some people feared engaging in a mate search because of the rumors. However, as can be seen by Mr. O's comment, "Well, rumors spread in Toyama Prefecture, especially in rural areas," it seems that rumors tend to spread more in areas with less population, even within Toyama City.

District D, however, has a lower population density than central Toyama City, so the room for privacy is more limited. For this reason, it was challenging to meet someone in the neighborhood or places other than the workplace. As seen by Mr. F's comment, "The hostess of the snack bar that I would casually drop by turned out to be a friend's sister", even if looking for a new acquaintance and

a network in a new place, people are connected to the network of old acquaintances, and privacy is not protected, leading to the difficulty of mate search.

A sense of shame often entails a mate search. Even in marriage matching in Singapore, there is a stigma in using the government's marriage support program (SDU, Social Development Unit), and those who attend the program are shamed, referring to the program name as an abbreviation for "Single, desperate and ugly" (Strijbosch 2015). Similarly, a sense of shame and stigma about using matchmaking events organized by the local government was also observed at a matchmaking party in District D, which the author attended. The party venue was surrounded by tall barriers so the inside could not be seen from the outside, and outsiders were strictly kept off. Participants had a strong sense of shame about participating in marriage-matching events.

However, in our interviews, a sense of shame is not limited to government-related marriage-matching events. The sense of shame that "those who are left behind who are in a mate search" was observed in everyday situations that have nothing to do with the government or local government. The lack of privacy due to the dense network was to blame rather than the relationship with the government (or local authority).

#### 4.4 Workplace characteristics

In both District D and Toyama City, some people cite "workplace characteristics" as hindering a mate search. This is related to the industrial structure in Toyama Prefecture. In contrast to the industrial structure of large cities where service industries have developed, the share of secondary industries in Toyama Prefecture (Nakamura 2021). Since many men are employed in the manufacturing and construction industries, it is easy for men to find a job and remain in the prefecture, while women tend to leave the prefecture in search of work in the service industry in large cities. Therefore, there are many workplaces in the manufacturing and construction industries in the prefecture, where very few or no single women are at the workplace, which has led to difficulties in mate search.

[District D]

Mr. F: There are few women in the workplace, and even those whose age are closest to mine are much older.

Mr. C: For quite a while, our company only hired college graduates, and college graduates [we hired] were mainly men. [...]. It's true that there are very few women in those cohorts [who were employed during that period]. If it were a big company, it would hire the same number of recruits yearly. But our company is smaller, and the number we employ

is very much affected by the economy of that year. There was a time when they stopped hiring female recruits for a couple of decades.

Regarding Mr. C, the impact of the industrial structure in Toyama Prefecture and the economic downturn led to the suspension of recruiting female employees, which affected the opportunities for single men to find a partner in the workplace.

[Toyama City]

Ms. P: Well, there aren't many people at my present [workplace]. My acquaintance works for a large company [in manufacturing], and they say that 80% of the employees are men, or that there are no women at all on the [factory] floor, and you have no opportunity to meet someone at the workplace, even with many colleagues.

Whether or not one has an opportunity to meet a partner depends on the gender ratio at the workplace or the type of industry one worked for. In the manufacturing industry, the percentage of men is very high, and there are few opportunities to meet someone of the other sex at the workplace. Moreover, as Mr.C stated, an economic downturn led the smaller companies to stop hiring women for a long time, which shut down their chances to meet someone in the workplace.

A comparison between District D and Toyama City revealed that the workplace characteristics were almost identical. This is thought to be because some people who live in District D commute to work in Toyama City. Moreover, as Mr. C stated, the economic climate at the time affected female employees' recruitment and consequently diminished the chances of meeting potential partners at the workplace or through work. The workplace has been known as one of the significant pathways for a single person to meet a potential partner in Japan since they spend long hours at work (Iwasawa and Mita 2005; Nakamura 2016), but workplace characteristics and economic climate seem to have rid those single men of the opportunity to meet a potential partner through the workplace.

#### 4.5 Inconvenience of transportation

Almost everyone in District D and Toyama City cited the inconvenience of transportation as a difficulty in meeting people. Especially in depopulated areas like District D, the number of public transportations route and their service frequency is extremely limited. Its last service of the day is much earlier than in big cities, and quite a few people felt it poses difficulties in meeting people.

[District D]

Mr. C: There are few opportunities to meet someone. The poor availability of public transportation is one of the reasons [for such difficulties]. In the countryside, even just



going out and having a drink is not easy if you think about how you will get home afterward.

It was also pointed out that the inconvenience of transportation can be an obstacle when participating in marriage-matching events.

Mr. B: If there is no one to pick me up [by car] since there is no train [running that late, after the event], and since I live in the mountains in District D, I go like, "I cannot go home, what can I do." [When I attended a recent marriage hunting event] I could drink because my former classmate gave me a ride. The availability of public transportation makes a big difference in treating meeting opportunities that entail drinking alcohol. In Kyoto, trains come so quickly.

Those who had previously lived in metropolitan areas (such as Mr. B ) compared their current lives in District D with their lives while they were in the city and were keenly aware of the inconvenience of transportation in areas with a small population. Quite a few people cited the inconvenience of transportation as a reason for having difficulty in a mate search. Dating, for instance, often entails opportunities to drink alcohol, and many people think that alcohol can facilitate them to relax and socialize with others. Still, the inconvenience of transportation makes it difficult to participate on such occasions, which entail alcohol drinking casually.

[Toyama City]

Compared to District D, public transportation around the central city area is much better developed in Toyama City. Still, there was a shared recognition that the inconvenience of public transport can hinder meeting someone.

Ms. R: [When I lived in a big city], I used to go out for a drink after work regularly, but here you need a little preparation to go out for a drink. That's right, it's like, here we need to make plans ahead of time, such as to have a ride in someone else's car [who will be a designated driver for the night] or to ask for a chauffeur service ("*unten daiko*"). You cannot just drop by a drinking place on your way home from work on a whim.

On the other hand, some said that although it was inconvenient compared to the big city like Tokyo, it was not that much of an obstacle. Even within Toyama City, there are differences in opinions depending on where you live, depending on the availability of public transportation. For example, Ms. P below lives in an area where she can travel by bus and train to the downtown area, so she does not feel that public transportation is an obstacle to meeting new people.

Ms. P: But I can still manage to come [to downtown] by bus and train. For me, at least. Indeed, it is inconvenient--- it is less convenient than what it is like in big cities. But, it [the availability of transportation in Toyama city] is still acceptable.

Based on the above responses, many people in Toyama City were also dissatisfied with transportation access. Two-thirds of the respondents said that the inconvenience of public transportation makes it challenging to meet someone, and even in Toyama City, transportation access creates an obstacle to meeting people.<sup>14</sup> Also, the level of difficulty public transportation poses on people varies depending on where one lives in Toyama City.

#### 4.6 "*Ie* (family)" System

It was also pointed out that the traditional family system ("*Ie*" system) in rural areas is a barrier to finding a partner. In the "*Ie*" system, first-born sons must succeed the family name and family lineage. Thus, such first-born sons must search for a partner who agrees to follow in the family line with him, succeed in a family business with him, and take care of his parents for him, often living with his parents in the same household within the District D. Thus, such first-born sons could not choose a partner just because he loves her. It made the mate search for them even harder.

[District D]

Ms. I: I wanted to marry the person I am with now, but it's impossible to get married just because I love him. Parents are involved in marriage matching, and it is more so in the countryside.

Mr. D: Some people (men) are in trouble because they must succeed in the family line. Those

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<sup>14</sup> Some respondents claim that it did not affect their mate search and that those who cite the inconvenience of public transportation as an obstacle in finding a mate are just using it as an excuse. Difficulties in mate search posed by non-DID are felt strongly by some, and not so strongly by others, probably depending on the resource (i.e., age, personalities) one has.

who must take over the family line are left behind.

Ms. H: There are many first-born sons among those who remain in the countryside. Many of those first-born sons are pampered, being brought up with extra care, love, and attention [as a successor]. They have to protect the family lineage. From a woman's point of view, if I go out with a first-born son, I will be made subjugated to the family system, which puts much pressure on the woman.

In District D, the eldest son had to succeed in the family lineage, and because of this, some people were reluctant to go outside of the area for a mate search. Family succession can also cause a problem in urban areas. Still, the pressure to succeed in family lineage remains much more vital in rural areas where the traditional family system is still robust. Family lineage succession and parental care became obstacles for single men in depopulated regions to find partners.

[Toyama City]

Mr. L: As for the pressure, my mother often says, "It's about time you got married.". [Author: I see. Did that put a little pressure on you?] No. Not so much pressure.

Ms. Q: People are often close-minded in the countryside, especially in Toyama Prefecture. They firmly believe that the eldest son must take over the family.

In the interviews in Toyama City, it seems that family succession and parental care affect mate search, but again, there are regional differences within Toyama Prefecture. In interviews in central Toyama City, no one said that succeeding in a family line or caring for parents would become an intense pressure that hinders a mate search. As Ms. Q noted, even within Toyama Prefecture, there seems to be a regional difference depending on whether it is a densely inhabited district near the city center or a non-densely inhabited district in the suburbs. In depopulated areas, few nuclear families and traditional family systems with solid ties between relatives and neighbors remain, which may pose a problem to a mate search.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, using interview data conducted in two areas with different degrees of population concentration, the central area of Toyama City and District D, we examined why it is difficult for single people (mainly single men) to find a partner in non-DID. Population decline is a serious problem, especially in rural areas of Japan, and it is known that unmarried people in non-DID are less likely to

have a partner than their DID counterparts (Sasaki 2015, etc.). To identify the mechanism which makes it difficult for single men in non-DID to find a partner, we analyzed comparative interview data conducted in DID and non-DID.

The "demand for marriage" and "the supply of partners" are said to be the factors that affect the fluctuation of marriages (Iwasawa and Mita, 2005, etc.). From the results of this paper's analysis, it is clear that "the supply of the partners" rather than "the demand for marriage" are the reason for the difficulties of single men's partner search in non-DID. Few respondents answered that they had no marriage demand (that is, they had no desire to get married). Still, they mentioned various difficulties regarding the "supply of partners" unique to non-DID. Moreover, the problem in "supply of partners" can mean different things: (1) there are not enough single women in the area, (2) there are enough single women but not enough women who satisfy the qualities they look for in a partner, and (3) there are women in the area but no "pathways" or opportunities to meet them. Findings from this study suggest that both (1) and (3) are the reasons for the difficulty in single men's mate search in non-DID.

First, the shortage of young single women in non-DID caused a marriage squeeze, making it difficult for single men to find a mate. Women are more likely to move out of rural areas than men, partly due to limited occupational opportunities for women. Thus, acute gender imbalance occurs (the ratio is two to one gender ratio for single men and women in their early 30s in District D, for instance), which leads to a marriage squeeze for single men. Those men have difficulties not because they are too selective and expect a too high standard for a future spouse. It is just that there is an acute shortage of single women in non-DID.

In addition, the difficulty in finding a mate becomes acute for those who are older and "left out" after most people get married at a young age. There are few single young women in the area, to begin with. If you remain single in a place for a long time where the influx of outside people is minimal, those who remain single in the area are likely to be someone's exes. If one tries to avoid going out with someone's ex, the pool of possible partners becomes even smaller.

Relatedly, "network density and sense of shame" were the factors that negatively affected a mate search in District D. District D has a tiny population, rumors quickly spread when they see people conducting a mate search, and if you are older and engage in mate search such as attending a matching event, it becomes more conspicuous. Also, if you try to go out with someone, that person is likely to be an ex-girlfriend or sister of your friend and neighbors. In such a situation, the information leak quickly. Those who are older and "left behind" have a strong sense of shame about conducting a mate search, which may even be shared by family members. The strong sense of shame and the network density, where most private information can be easily leaked, hindered actively seeking a partner.

Moreover, not only in District D but in Toyama Prefecture as a whole, workplace characteristics can become an obstacle to a mate search. In Toyama Prefecture, where secondary industries

(manufacturing and construction) are the leading industries, and the share of the service industry is relatively small, young single women are likely to leave the area to search for a job in the service industry in large cities (since the share of the service industry is more prominent in large cities). The manufacturing and construction industries usually hire more male employees and fewer (or no) female employees. At the time of the economic downturn, some manufacturing firms cut down on the recruitment of young women (Ms. P). Since the workplace is one of the significant "pathways" for Japanese people to meet their spouse (Iwasawa and Mita 2005), the workplace characteristic of Toyama prefecture, where fewer women than men are working, makes it difficult those single men to find a mate through work.

"Inconvenience of transportation" was also an obstacle to a mate search in District D. Socializing opportunities involving alcohol are limited in areas with minimal public transportation, and one cannot go about the area without driving a car daily. It is challenging to have a drinking party in the downtown area on the way home from work or to participate in a marriage matching party. To participate in social gatherings involving alcohol, it is necessary to make a hotel reservation or ask for chauffeur service in advance, so it is impossible to participate casually and on a whim. In this way, the limited availability of public transportation in non-DID becomes an obstacle to a mate search.

The traditional family system persists in non-DID and is also an obstacle to finding a mate. The idea that the eldest son must succeed in the family lineage still persists in non-DID. Thus, choosing a partner based only on love for each other is impossible, and family succession and parental intentions are involved. Even from a woman's point of view, she then will be subjugated to the house (Ms. H), and therefore a marriage with a first-born son may be shied away.

From the results of this paper's analysis, "the supply of the partners" rather than "the demand for marriage" are the reason for the difficulties of single men's partner search in non-DID. Moreover, not only the shortage of single women in the area caused the shortage of the supply, but also problems in "pathways" or opportunities to connect single men to single women posed a problem. Not only are there much fewer young single women than single men in District D, but also some factors hinder the "pathways" for a single man to meet a potential partner: dense network and sense of shame, workplace characteristics, poor availability of the public transportation, and traditional family system<sup>15</sup>.

Based on these findings, what measures should be taken to increase mate search opportunities in non-DID such as District D and the suburbs of Toyama City? There is a hint in the findings from research by Suzuki (2014). According to this study, in the case of recruiting people from outside the prefecture for the purpose of training skills in traditional industries in the region, as a secondary result,

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<sup>15</sup> Among them, workplace characteristics are the problem shared with Toyama City.

relationships and marriages occurred between people from outside the area and the locals (Suzuki 2014). Moreover, even if their relationships and marriages do not work in such cases, people from outside the prefecture remain in the area because of the jobs they have attained after the training.

Thus, on the part of local governments, rather than sponsoring an event that focuses directly addressing marriage, such as marriage matching events, sponsoring a training program for traditional crafts, for instance, and connecting them to local job opportunities, may end up offering practical support for a mate search. If skill training is the primary goal, there is no sense of "shame" associated with marriage-matching events. In addition, interactions with people of the opposite sex become possible through daily interactions, and they spend a long time getting to know each other well. A more lasting relationship is more likely to be obtained. In addition, even if it does not lead to marriage, if the training opportunities direct to acquiring jobs in the area, participants will still settle down in the community and help solve the problem of depopulation. Regarding the issue of family succession, people who come from outside the prefecture for skill training can become successors to traditional industries and families. Sponsoring marriage matching events are also desirable because they lead directly to opportunities for a mate search. At the same time, approaches such as supporting training programs in traditional crafts to attract out-of-the-prefecture people in ways that lead to local job opportunities can effectively combat depopulation.

In recent years, urban-to-rural domestic migration, which many local governments have promoted, is thought to be useful not only for increasing the population through the relocation of migrants but also for increasing opportunities for a mate search. A too-dense network used to be an obstacle to a partner search, but this obstacle can be overcome by the migration of outsiders who are not strongly tied to the network.

Dating in rural areas is also beneficial for out-of-the-prefecture single women. Those disadvantaged in economic resources tend to be left out in metropolitan areas. However, in non-DID, single men with resources remain single [Sasaki 2015]. Therefore, from the point of view of single women, many resourceful men stay in the marriage market.

If we can provide training and employment opportunities that are attractive to people outside the prefecture and increase the number of immigrants (not limited to single women, and also includes temporary migrants for training) from outside the prefecture, we believe that this will improve the supply of a potential partner for the single men in non-DID.

Last but not least, policy measures to support family formation should not be provided uniformly across the country but should be tailored to the problems faced by each region. The depopulated areas had their own barriers (shame, overly dense networks, extreme male-to-female ratios). The urban and rural areas share similar problems regarding the increase in the number of people who remain single and have late marriages. The actual obstacles that hinder matching are different depending on the

region. If support is to be provided, it is necessary to provide support that matches the region's problems.

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