

Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture presents a workshop on

SOURCES AND CONSEQUENCES OF LOW BIRTH: WORK LIFE BALANCE IN JAPAN

Date: May 23, 2026, 9:00AM – 2:15 PM

Venue: Room 309, 3F, Building 2,
Sophia University

Language: English (No translation)

In person only / No registration required

Organizers:

- **Kay Shimizu** (University of Pittsburgh)
- **Gabriella Lukacs** (University of Pittsburgh)
- **Hisayo M. Maitani** (Shizuoka University)
- **David Slater** (Sophia University)

This workshop examines the cross-cultural adoption and implementation of “work-life balance” from the United States to Japan, positioning it as a critical lens through which to understand Japan’s depopulation crisis. By convening scholars from the U.S., Japan and Taiwan, the session explores the correlations between labor struggles and low fertility within the context of Japan’s evolving social contract.

Japan’s postwar growth relied on “patriarchal laborism,” a system where a rigid gender division of labor relegated women to the “homefront” for childcare and eldercare. This model persists through a significant gender-wage gap and a demanding corporate culture characterized by mandatory overtime and after-work socializing, which often forces women to choose between careers and family. While the “Womonomics” initiative and the Japanese government have framed female labor participation as a solution to labor shortages and declining birth rates—preferring this over liberalized immigration—tensions remain between workforce integration and pro-natalist pressures.

The workshop investigates how Japanese employers respond to governmental mandates, such as increasing paternity leave to 85% by 2030 and extending protections to irregular workers. Drawing on Arlie Hochschild’s foundational concepts of the “second shift” and the “time bind,” we will analyze whether family-friendly policies—like flextime and parental leave—are effectively utilized or avoided due to fears of career stagnation. Comparisons with the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and OECD data highlight the systemic gap: the U.S. ranks 10th in work-life balance, while Japan remains 25th. Ultimately, this workshop asks how these theories must be updated post-pandemic to address whether a balance between professional and domestic life can truly reverse Japan’s low fertility trend.

HOSTED BY

This event is hosted by [Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture](#)

IN COLLABORATION WITH

[University of Pittsburgh Asian Studies Center](#) and [the Japan Foundation](#)



上智大学
SOPHIA UNIVERSITY

JAPAN FOUNDATION



国際交流基金

Bios of the workshop organizers



Kay Shimizu is an Assistant Professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research addresses institutional design and their effects on economic governance with a focus on East Asia. Most recently, she is the author of *Betting on the Farm: Institutional Change in Japanese Agriculture* (with Patricia Maclachlan), and *The Digital Transformation and Japan's Political Economy* (with Ulrike Schaede). Her current research is about the confluence of demographic change and the digital transformation in the East Asian context.



Gabriella Lukács is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. She is a media anthropologist who conducts research in Japan and Hungary. She is the author of two books: *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan* and *Invisibility by Design: Women and Work in Japan's Digital Economy*. Her third book is titled *The Left of Hope: Media Activism in Illiberal Hungary*. She is currently developing two new projects. One examines the techno-utopian solutions the technology sector offers to the problem of declining birth rates in Japan, while the other studies grassroots pronatalism and reproductive justice activism in Hungary.



Hisayo Maitani is a professor at Shizuoka University, where she teaches Japanese civil law — including family law, contract law, property law, and torts — as well as environmental law and policy. Her book *Modern Implications of the Remedies for US Environmental Law* (2023) examines contemporary issues in environmental remedies. Her current research includes a comparative project on legal and policy responses to demographic decline in Japan and the United States, legal protections for foreign immigrants and elderly foreign residents in Japan, and the legal dimensions of renewable energy development.



David Slater is a cultural anthropologist and professor emeritus at Sophia University. Slater's work spans social class and youth culture, disaster and recovery, urban studies, and civic participation. He currently studies the movement of refugees and migrants in the urban Kanto region and serves as director of Refugee Voices Japan. His most recent book, *Alternative Politics in Contemporary Japan: New Directions in Social Movements* (2025), examines emerging forms of political engagement and social movement activity in Japan. He currently studies the movement of refugees and migrants in the urban Kanto region and is the director of Refugee Voices Japan.

Session 1. PANEL DISCUSSION:

Work–Life Balance and Family Law Practice in Japan, the United States, and Taiwan

Chair: **Hisayo M. Maitani**

Panel Abstract: Family law cases-- involving parental rights, access rights, domestic violence, child support, and caregiving obligations--sit at the intersection of household dynamics and labor conditions, making them a particularly revealing lens through which to examine work–life balance. This roundtable brings together practitioners from three distinct legal systems and social environments to explore how family law practice illuminates broader institutional and cultural challenges across Japan, the United States, and Taiwan. It asks how different legal traditions and cultural contexts shape the balance between childcare, eldercare, and professional responsibilities; how family law might better support diverse family forms and evolving workstyles; and what values should guide the next generation of professionals navigating these demands. The panel aims not only to compare and illuminate ongoing challenges but to contribute to the broader conversation about how workplaces, legal institutions, and social norms might change together.

Bios of the panels in session 1



Judge Sabina A. Helton (United States): A judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court, Judge Helton served for seven years in the juvenile division, where her work centered on custody, domestic violence restraining orders, and children’s educational and residential matters. Prior to her appointment to the bench, she worked in private practice and served on firm management committees addressing work–life balance. She will speak to the challenges of combining professional responsibilities with parenting and eldercare, and to the critical role of quality childcare systems in supporting working families.



Judge Hsin Mei Chang (Taiwan): A judge in Taiwan’s family law system with expertise in parent–child law, domestic violence prevention, and mediation, Judge Chang’s remarks focus on Taiwan’s childcare support policies and the flexibility of judicial institutions. She brings practical insight into how family obligations and professional responsibilities can be balanced in a rapidly changing social environment.



Yuka Hashigaya (Japan): A family law attorney handling divorce, parental responsibility, access rights, and domestic violence cases, Hashigaya has worked extensively in public legal services, supporting vulnerable individuals and addressing regional disparities in access to family law remedies. She brings firsthand experience navigating childcare responsibilities alongside legal practice.

Session 2: PAPER PRESENTATION:

“Beyond Work-Life Balance: Immigration, Compensation Scale, and Japan’s Social Contract”

Chair: **David Slater**

Session abstract: Japan’s response to its demographic crisis has largely centered on mobilizing women into the workforce rather than expanding immigration. Yet without significant migration, demographic decline cannot be reversed. Migrants are already embedded in manufacturing, construction, nursing care, and services--navigating work-life balance under conditions shaped by visa restrictions, employer dependency, and transnational family obligations. This session brings together scholars and legal practitioners to examine what the presence of migrants reveals about the limits of Japan’s current policy framework. It asks what a more just and sustainable approach to migration might look like in an aging society, and what it would mean to finally include migrants in Japan’s social contract.

Bios and paper abstracts for session 2

Paper 1.

Policy Effectiveness for “Irregular migrants.”

Tatsuya Yokohama



Tatsuya Yokohama is a professor at Shizuoka University; Yokohama’s research examines theories of immigration justice in the context of sharp policy controversies across developed countries. He focuses on social exclusion, the moral foundations of border control, and the principles of social integration and equal relations between migrants and residents. His presentation considers the conditions that limit immigration policy effectiveness-- including the “efficiency gap” described by Czaika and de Haas--and explores the moral justification for legalizing irregular migrants, including refugees and forcibly displaced persons whose protection he regards as a moral imperative.

Abstract: Immigration policy is a subject of daily debate across developed countries, including Japan, with increasing attention paid to the treatment of irregular migrants. While calls for deportation have become more prominent, the inherent limits of policy effectiveness make the presence of irregular migrants virtually unavoidable. Crucially, this population includes refugees and forcibly displaced persons whose protection is a moral imperative. This paper examines two related questions. The first concerns the structural conditions that constrain policy effectiveness — in particular the “efficiency gap” identified by Czaika and de Haas, which describes the persistent divergence between stated policy goals and actual migration outcomes. The second concerns the moral justification for legalizing irregular migrants, explored through a series of specific case studies. Together, these lines of inquiry ask whether there is a sufficient moral basis for rigid border control and the restrictive membership models on which sovereign states continue to rely.

Paper 2.

Embodied Costs of Mobility: Indian Migrant Labour and Work-Life Balance in Japan

Megha Wadhwa



Megha Wadhwa is a filmmaker, anthropologist, and author based in Japan, Wadhwa is an assistant professor at Sophia University. She is the author of *Indian Migrants in Tokyo: A Study of Socio-Cultural, Religious and Working Worlds* (Routledge, 2021) and has directed several documentary films including *Home in the Making* (2025). Her presentation draws on ethnographic research with Indian migrants employed through Technical Intern Training and Specified Skilled Worker visa programs, foregrounding their own accounts of transnational labor — constrained leave, night shifts taken for higher pay despite health concerns, and the difficulty of maintaining family ties across borders. She argues that work–life balance for migrant work-

ers is not merely a personal negotiation but is structured by visa regulations, employer expectations, and remittance obligations.

Abstract: Japan’s acute workforce shortages and India’s competitive employment landscape have created new migration pathways, yet the everyday realities of Indian workers navigating these systems remain largely unexplored. This paper draws on ethnographic research with Indian migrants employed through Technical Intern Training and Specified Skilled Worker visa programs across manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and nursing care. Moving beyond policy frameworks, it foregrounds the voices of migrants themselves, whose accounts reveal the tensions embedded in transnational labor arrangements — constrained leave, night shifts taken for higher pay despite health concerns, and the difficulty of maintaining family ties across borders. These narratives illuminate how work–life balance is not merely a personal negotiation but is structured by visa regulations, employer expectations, and remittance obligations. By situating these lived experiences within broader discussions of migration governance, the paper asks how demographic solutions are experienced bodily and emotionally, and what costs are borne by those who bridge the divide between aging and youthful societies.

Paper 3.

The Hidden Foundation: Migrant Labor and the Limits of Japan’s Demographic Fix

David Slater

Abstract: Japan has invested heavily in work-life balance reforms—parental leave, childcare expansion, flexible employment—as a response to its demographic crisis. These policies share a common assumption: that the birth rate can be raised if the conditions for family formation are improved. Yet the birth rate continues to fall. Less often acknowledged is that the care infrastructure sustaining these reforms is already quietly dependent on migrant workers—who are systematically denied the stable residency, family reunification rights, and social protections the system extends to everyone else. This paper argues that demographic compensation through immigration is not a marginal policy option but an arithmetic necessity, and that the scale required would be transformative. Bringing net migration to levels that meaningfully offset population decline would reshape labor markets, welfare provision, public education, healthcare, and urban life—leading to a reawakening of possibility in Japan.

Bio on the second page.

Lunchtime talk:

“The Effects of Gender (In)Balance in Japanese Media”

Yuka Mizoue



Yuka Mizoue (USJLP 2024, 2025) has worked for TV Asahi as a TV journalist and documentary filmmaker for 20 years. Her passion and life mission are to promote gender equality in Japan through journalism. She has recently been recognized with the Media Ambitious Award for her documentary *Sexism: The Real Truth Behind Japanese Politics*, which focuses on the barriers women face in Japanese politics.

She has recently launched “Watashi to News” in ABEMA News channel, a news program specifically designed for women, and hosts the podcast *Honma no Honne*, where she explains current affairs in a clear and accessible way, earning strong resonance among female listeners.

In addition to her editorial work, she is an active leader in advancing gender equality in the newsroom and recently co-founded the Japanese Women Journalists Association. She holds a B.A. from Doshisha University and studied documentary filmmaking at the University of California, San Diego.

Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture: <https://www.icc-sophia.com/>

The University of Pittsburgh Asian Studies Center: <https://www.global.pitt.edu/asc>

The Japan Foundation: <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/>