



What Toshima City Aims to Achieve after Escaping the “Risk of Disappearing”



Hareza Ikebukuro opened in 2020 on the site of the former Toshima City Office building.
Photo: Courtesy of Toshima City

Takagiwa Miyuki (Mayor of Toshima City), interviewed by Kiyono Yumi, journalist

In 2014, Toshima City (Toshima Ward) was included in the list of [“cities at risk of disappearing”](#) announced by the Japan Policy Council (chaired by Masuda Hiroya), becoming the only one of Tokyo’s 23 wards (special wards or cities) to be included. Toshima City has now escaped from the “cities at risk of disappearing” list, but how has it fared over the past 10 years? And what is its goal?

“Toshima City is disappearing!”

—How did you react to Toshima City being named as a city at risk of disappearing in 2014?

I remember that time well. It was when I moved from the position of Director of the Planning Section, Declining Birth Rate Countermeasures Division, Welfare and Health Bureau, Tokyo Metropolitan Government, to the position of Director of the Private School Promotion Division, Private School Department, because I was deeply involved in day care centers, kindergartens, child care support, and women’s support through these two divisions.

At that time, one of the biggest problems for the Tokyo Metropolitan Government was dealing with children on waiting lists, the number of which had risen to over 8,600. As the way women worked changed,

how could the government quickly improve the child-rearing environment? While we were working on this as a top priority, we were shocked to hear that the number of women in urban areas was declining.

—Was this a topic of discussion for the Tokyo Metropolitan Government?

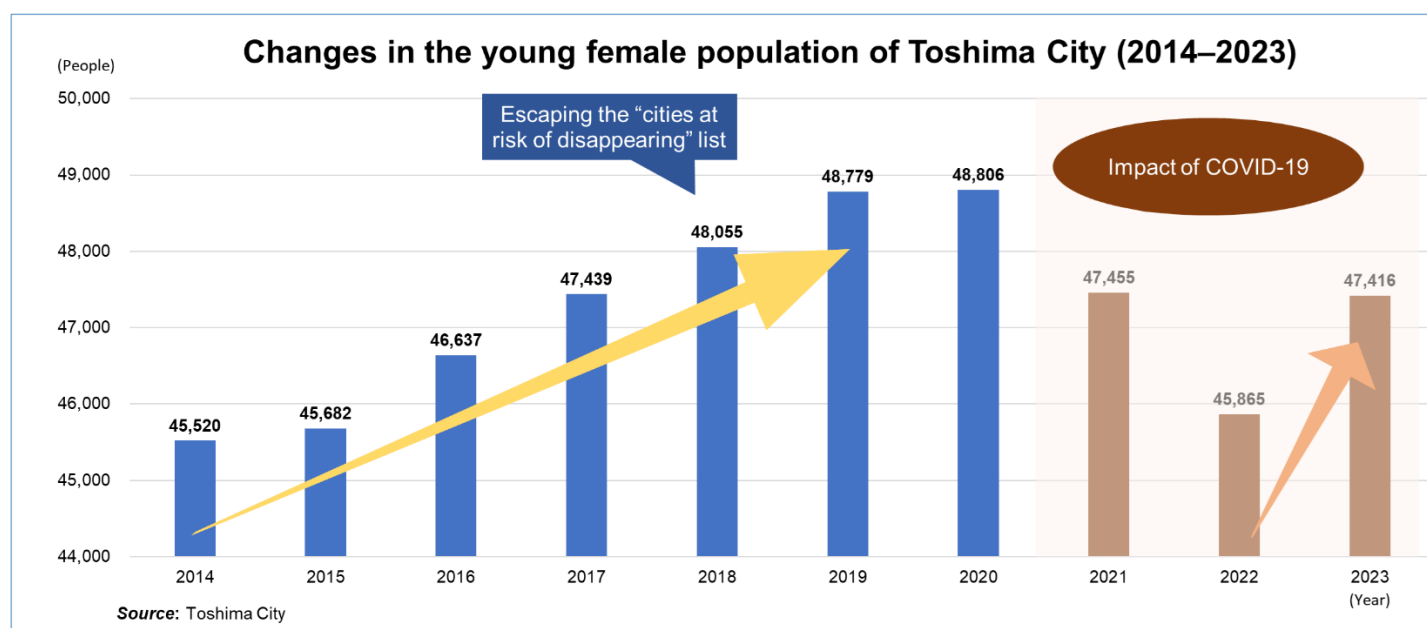
I think everyone was surprised. In particular, Toshima City, one of Tokyo's 23 wards, has Ikebukuro Station, one of the three major terminals, and the area in front of the station is full of young people and has a lively image, so what would it mean if it disappeared?

At that time, I didn't know the details of the situation in Toshima City, so I felt a sense of crisis, wondering what would happen to Tokyo if it was like that in Toshima City, and if it could be the same in Shinjuku or Shibuya. Both are cities that usually have a lot of young people and a vibrant image. I wondered if those young people would settle there.

—You became the Deputy Mayor of Toshima City in 2020. What did you think about the possibility of Toshima City disappearing at that time?

Thanks to the swift action taken by my predecessor, Mayor Takano Yukio, Toshima City was declared out of the “cities at risk of disappearing” category in 2019, a year before I took office. A 2014 Japan Policy Council study of cities at risk of disappearing identified municipalities where the population of young women aged 20-39 is expected to decline by 50% or more between 2010 and 2040. In the survey conducted at that time, the decline rate of the young female population in Toshima City was 50.8%.

Since then, Toshima City has taken various measures to increase its young female population by more than 2,500 people, from 45,520 to 48,055 between 2014 and 2018 (see figure). The 2018 population projections from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS) showed that the decline in Toshima City's young female population between 2015 and 2045 was 18.9%, a significant improvement. If we were able to recover in this way, I felt that we needed to think beyond that, rather than stop there.



—What were the measures that Toshima City implemented that were effective in helping the city escape from the “risk of disappearing”?

An analysis by a study team set up within the Toshima City Office immediately after the “cities at risk of disappearing shock” revealed that the main reason for the city being included in the list was the “significant decline in the number of young women moving in.” So the City adopted the slogan “Building a city friendly to children and women” and began to work out concrete measures.

The basis for this was the establishment of the “Toshima F1 Conference” consisting of the “F1 demographic” (women aged 20–34 who live, work, or study in Toshima City), and these women expressing their honest opinions and requests to the Toshima City government. From complaints such as “There’s no place to go on vacation” and “There’s no place for children to run around” in Toshima City, to complaints such as “The public toilets are dirty,” the city listened to their honest opinions, turned them into concrete measures, and implemented them in rapid succession.

Toshima City was the first of the 23 wards to achieve zero waiting lists for day care centers and to extend after-school care until 7 p.m. at all city elementary schools. The number of privately licensed daycare centers in Toshima City was 9 in 2013, but has increased to 69 by 2021. The number of children on waiting lists, which was 270 in 2013, reached zero in 2017 and 2018, and has since remained at zero for four consecutive years from 2020 to 2023.

—At the same time, the city launched a number of projects to promote itself as a “city of culture” and tried to change its image.

Starting with the Toshima City Office, “Toshima Ecomusee Town,” which is directly connected to Higashi-Ikebukuro Station (Yurakucho Subway Line), “Hareza Ikebukuro,” the outdoor theater “GLOBAL RING” at the west exit of Ikebukuro Station, and “Toshima City Tokiwaso Manga Museum” in Minaminagasaki were built one after another, and the east-west passageway “WE ROAD” at Ikebukuro Station was also brightened up. Unique parks such as “Minami-Ikebukuro Park,” “Naka-ikebukuro Park,” and “IKE · SUNPARK” were also developed around Ikebukuro Station.

—This has completely changed the image of Ikebukuro, once known for the 3Ds of “dark, dangerous, and dirty.”

In 2019, the momentum for the revitalization of Toshima City reached a peak with the “[Culture City of East Asia 2019](#)” cultural event, held jointly with the city of Xi’an, China, and the metropolitan city of Incheon, South Korea.

—Shortly after that, Japan was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was at such a time that you were appointed Deputy Mayor. What did the former Mayor Takano say to you?

“We have worked hard, including overcoming the shock of cities in danger of disappearing. We have made great strides in urban development, and Toshima City has changed significantly. From now on, we would like to focus on welfare and education. Please support us,” he said. I know that the former mayor, Takano, appreciated my experience in welfare, childcare, women’s affairs and education in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Toshima City has two deputy mayors, and for three years I was in charge of the Health and Welfare Division, the Children and Family Division, the Culture, Commerce and Industry Division, the Environmental Sanitation Division, and the Ikebukuro Public Health Center.

Picking up the baton from the former mayor

——In the election following the death of former Mayor Takano in 2023, you were elected as the new mayor of Toshima City. What was your vision for the future?

As former Mayor Takano said, my role is to prepare the “next step” in the city’s development. First of all, we decided to further refine our welfare policies, starting with childcare assistance. Since the “cities in danger of disappearing shock,” the number of kindergartens has increased, the number of children on waiting lists has been reduced to zero, and the shortage of public facilities has been made up. The next challenge will be how much we can empathize with the “feelings and desires” of city dwellers.

——That shows the improvement of the soft aspects, but what kind of things have you done, exactly?

From this year, 2024, we have begun to make childbirth expenses essentially free as a unique measure of Toshima City.

In addition, there is a strong image that childcare support begins after childbirth, but from pregnancy to childbirth and after returning home after childbirth, women go through a difficult time both physically and mentally, especially until their child is one year old.

Therefore, relevant departments have worked together to establish systems that can reduce the burden not only of childcare but also of housework under the motto of “uninterrupted support.” This includes strengthening the support provided by “postpartum doulas” and increasing the number of “postpartum care facilities” where mothers can stay overnight with their children when they are tired. Furthermore, to make it easier to use, we will begin offering day care services in addition to overnight services.

——Has the COVID-19 pandemic had any effect?

As deputy mayor, I faced new challenges while in charge of COVID-19 countermeasures. Just when parental leave systems were in place in companies, COVID-19 increased telecommuting, and people continued to stay home and not meet people, and the isolation of families with children became a problem. Before their children were born, women had a place to connect with society, such as the company, but during parental leave they are isolated from that and left alone with their children. [These problems] are not limited to women, because the rate at which men take parental leave is also increasing.

——The focus has shifted from children on waiting lists to the isolation of families raising children.

Even if the Toshima City Office creates systems and facilities and invites families with children to “come and talk to us” or “come and play,” that alone is not enough to support them. Therefore, we have also implemented visitation programs that watch over parents and children while bringing cakes and sweets as gifts, and programs that give rice as gifts to single-parent families.

In the watch and care program, when you give the children sweets, you can ask, “Is the child okay? Is the mother tired?” We set up a system where people come to the city office to pick up the rice, and through the interaction there, we can connect those who have concerns with counselors and allow them to meet other parents. We put these things in place because we thought it was important to give people a chance to get out of the house.

—Has this perspective been with you since your days as Deputy Mayor?

My desire to thoroughly connect with the city's residents from a "resident's perspective" remains unchanged. In this sense, some individual projects will continue while others will be new ventures. I want people to grow up healthy and create their own future, even if they have a physical disability, come from a poor family, or have been abused by their parents, and since becoming mayor, I have felt even more strongly that I want this to be possible in Toshima City.

Supporting children with disabilities is one of these issues, and although its importance is recognized, it has not been detailed enough due to the small number of eligible people, and it has tended to be a low priority. From now on, I'd like to shed light on measures that will make people who are currently inconvenienced happy and say, "Oh, that's good," even if each project is small in scale.

—What kind of support will you provide?

For example, it is difficult for a healthy child with a severely disabled sibling to attend a sports day or a school visit together with their parents, even if both parents are present. In such cases, a nurse will take the disabled child to the special education school on behalf of the parents.

Such support may seem small, but it can be a great help for the family.

—If Mayor Takano's administration worked on increasing the population of young women in Toshima City in general terms, then your administration is digging deeper into the individual issues.

I am conscious of going deeper into areas that other municipalities do not, and highlighting the characteristics of Toshima City.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated poverty, and the issue of girls not being able to buy sanitary napkins was highlighted. I was also shocked to realize that there is a gap in support for women from compulsory education to the child-rearing generation. Such blind spots still exist in many places. For the past three years, Toshima City has been running a project to support young women, such as distributing free sanitary products. In the future, whether or not to have children will be a personal decision, but we support and stand by those who want to have children. And whether they are pregnant or raising children, we want all women in Toshima City to grow up healthy and move forward. This feeling is strong.

"Mayor, don't forget the elderly."

—Where do your feelings about Toshima City come from?

I myself am from Tanashi City (now Nishitokyo City) in Tokyo, but my husband was born and raised in Toshima City, and my classmate is raising his children in Toshima City. Watching their interactions up close, I always thought, "Toshima City is a city, but it's a warm place with a strong sense of neighborhood. The elderly people in Toshima City are also healthy, and when I talk about supporting education and women, they say to me, "Mayor, don't forget the elderly" (laughs). Supporting young people and supporting the elderly are the two wheels of a healthy city government. I would like to make efforts to improve the Community Comprehensive Support Center, and we have expanded the "Toshima Otassha (Healthy Elderly) Card" [Public Bathing Service Offering Bathing for 100 Yen to Toshima City Elderly Residents], which allows you to use the public bath for 100 yen from 30 times a year to 40 times a year, and are distributing it to people over the age of 65. I think it is important to take a bath to refresh one's

mind and body, and at the same time to interact with various people in the community center of the city, the public bath.

——To maintain the population, not only young women but also older people are essential.

I was always close to my grandmother, and she always took care of me, so I wanted to work in the field of elderly care, and that's why I joined the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. That's why I sincerely hope that the elderly will remain healthy and happy forever. In addition, by improving support for the elderly, I would be happy if their children and grandchildren could experience the good things about Toshima City, and even if they don't live here now, they would think, "If I were to live here in the future, Toshima City would be a good place to live," which would eventually lead to an increase in the permanent population.

——I heard from an acquaintance in Osaka, "My daughter, who works, is raising two children in Toshima City, but because the support is so generous, she is considering having a third child."

That's exactly it! I think the fact that we are able to develop and provide such a concentrated educational support system is a strength of Toshima City. We want to continue to create a seamless support system so that people who move to Toshima City can continue to live here.

——There is some discussion that increasing the population of a municipality is a zero-sum game when the population is declining nationwide...

Even within Tokyo's 23 wards, there is competition to improve policies for families with children, such as free school lunches. Moreover, in the structure between the 23 wards and the municipalities, or Tokyo and the regions, if one side increases, the other is likely to decrease.

I personally do not think it is desirable for the population to concentrate in one municipality, or for municipalities to compete with each other, not just in Toshima City. I believe that it is the responsibility of the administration to maintain an appropriate population while facing the needs of each resident and strive to achieve a good balance in the population ratio of each generation.

Towards a city where multicultural coexistence is possible

——Are you considering actively recruiting foreigners to increase the population of young women?

The total population of Toshima City, including foreigners, exceeded 290,000 in 2018. While the foreign population has been increasing over the past few decades, it has decreased significantly since 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but since March 2022, entry restrictions have been eased and the number has been increasing rapidly again. As of January 2024, the proportion of foreigners in the total population is 11.22%, the second highest in Tokyo after Shinjuku City's 12.57%. The foreign population is also the fifth highest after Shinjuku City, Edogawa City, Adachi City, and Koto City.

In terms of countries of origin, China was the most common, followed by South Korea, Taiwan, etc., but in recent years, the number of people from Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Nepal, and Vietnam has increased, and as of January 2024, there are people from a total of 134 countries and regions.

If the number is really increasing to this extent, I think it is important to take a positive view of it and change policies to make Toshima City an easy place for foreigners to live. Foreign families and young people choose Toshima City as a place where they can live, work, be active, have children, and raise their children. As important residents and friends of the city, we want to listen to your voices and create a vibrant city where multicultural coexistence is possible.

——Finally, Mayor Takagiwa, could you tell us a place you would recommend as a symbol of change in Toshima City?

It's "Hareza Ikebukuro." Hareza Ikebukuro has eight theaters and a movie theater, and is a symbol of Toshima City, which is full of art and culture. Naka-ikebukuro Park in the center is a small square, but the surrounding businesses have established an area management system and hold a variety of events every month, such as *uchimizu* water sprinkling, *Anison Bon Odori* (anime song Bon Dance) festival in the summer, and Halloween cosplay in the fall. In addition, the animated Ikebukuro Flagship Store is a "holy place" where anime fans from all over the world gather. Families, friends, lovers, young anime fans, foreigners, and others who come to Ikebukuro for fun will travel from Hareza Ikebukuro to Sunshine City, Toshima City Tokiwaso Manga Museum, Jiyu Gakuen School Myonichikan, Kishimojindo Hall at Homyoji Temple, Komagome, the birthplace of Somei-Yoshino Cherry Blossoms, Sugamo (known as Granny's Harajuku), and other places. Hareza Ikebukuro is the starting point for such excursions. If you go a little further, you can also go to Otsuka, where there are many attractive drinking establishments. (laughs)

——I don't know of any other local government that has used the "cities in danger of disappearing shock" to change to this extent.

Former Mayor Takano has worked tirelessly on infrastructure development and support projects with the goal of "creating a city friendly to women and children." Now, Toshima City is also working to develop a walkable city. In urban development, people's lives and perspectives are important. With the efforts we have made so far as an important foundation, we would like to tackle various challenges in a more detailed manner, with all our efforts on both the hardware and software sides.



Takagiwa Miyuki, Mayor of Toshima City
Photo: Courtesy of Toshima City

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Born in Tokyo in 1965. Graduated from Tokyo Woman’s Christian University in 1988. After working in the private sector, she joined the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 1995. She served as Director of the Planning Division of the Low Birthrate Society Countermeasures Department of the Welfare and Health Bureau, Director of the Private School Promotion Division of the Life and Culture Bureau, Director of Secretarial Affairs for Governor Koike Yuriko, and Deputy Mayor of Toshima City, and was elected Mayor of Toshima City in 2023.

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