

A 14-YEAR-OLD junior high school student from a middle class family finds herself unmarried and pregnant. It does not take long until her parents, her friends, her classmates, and everyone around her realize what has happened. Her parents, the gynecologist who confirms the pregnancy, and the school authorities all recommend an abortion as she is too young, needs to continue with her education, and would find it exceptionally hard to support herself and her child. Yet the young expectant mother is unwavering in her decision and eventually gives birth to her child outside marriage.

This is not a story of another teenage mother in the United States or the UK, where the numbers of such women have increased dramatically in postwar years, and where many people believe a whole host of social ills can be traced to the lapses of judgment of poor unmarried women who bear children they can ill afford.¹ The girl in fact is called Miki and she is the protagonist of *14sai no Haha* (A 14-Year-Old Mother), one of the most popular,² as well as most controversial, Japanese television dramas in 2006. In contrast to many Western countries, unwed mothers in Japan are very rare and teenage unwed mothers even more so. Yet, for months after the last episode had aired, the drama continued to attract considerable attention. Part of the audience clearly believed that the drama, if in an exaggerated way, somehow reflected social ills that young people in contemporary Japan are exposed to. In a survey by the National Congress of Parents and Teachers Association of Japan it was ranked as the second program parents were least willing to have their junior high school children watch.³ It also won the highest TV drama award of the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan in 2007 for it was judged to portray well the reality of an ordinary family and what can happen to it, thereby conveying an important social message.⁴

The National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan also recommended the drama for families with children.⁵

In reality in 2005 only forty-two girls in Japan who were fourteen or younger gave birth, almost an order of magnitude less than in England and Wales when weighted by population size.⁶ In Japan, 2 percent of all children were born outside wedlock in 2005 compared to 43 percent in the UK (2005) and 43 percent in the United States (2004).⁷ Given this rarity, it is striking how much attention the phenomenon attracts in the media and popular culture.⁸

The Puzzle of Unwed Motherhood in Japan

In Western countries unwed mothers and their children came into the spotlight only once they constituted a significant proportion of single-parent households. Their grip on public attention is explained by fear that growing up in an alternative family leads to negative outcomes for children that include lower educational attainment, teenage pregnancy, and behavior and physical and mental health problems.⁹ In Japan, where only one in about fifty children was born outside marital union in 2006,¹⁰ extramarital fertility—however evaluated—simply does not qualify as a significant social problem. Figure 1.1 shows how exceptional the cumulative decisions of Japanese women are compared to their Western counterparts when it comes to out-of-wedlock childbearing.

What is it that gives Japanese single unwed mothers such a grip on the public imagination in spite of their uncommonness?¹¹ This book will show how unwed motherhood challenges the basic norms associated with childbearing and childrearing, leaving few people indifferent.

Given the lively public interest in unwed mothers and the fact that low illegitimacy rates suggest a distinctive pattern of family formation, the dearth of scholarly interest seems puzzling. Although many scholars have mentioned the rarity of out-of-wedlock childbearing and suggested possible explanations,¹² few have made Japanese unwed mothers the object of their study.¹³ Proposed explanations include economic difficulties, legal discrimination, and the easy availability of abortion. I will discuss these in Chapters 2 to 4. In recent years a number of studies on Japanese single mothers were completed in both English and Japanese. Most of them are, however, predominantly interested in the experiences of divorcées and concentrate on the consequences, rather than the causes, of single motherhood.¹⁴ A major reason for the neglect of unwed mothers is probably that illegitimacy trends have for a long time been overshadowed by divorce trends. While creeping up slowly from 1963 until the 1990s, the divorce rate in Japan was still lower than in most Western industrialized countries. This made it possible for researchers to assume that low divorce rates and low illegitimacy rates had

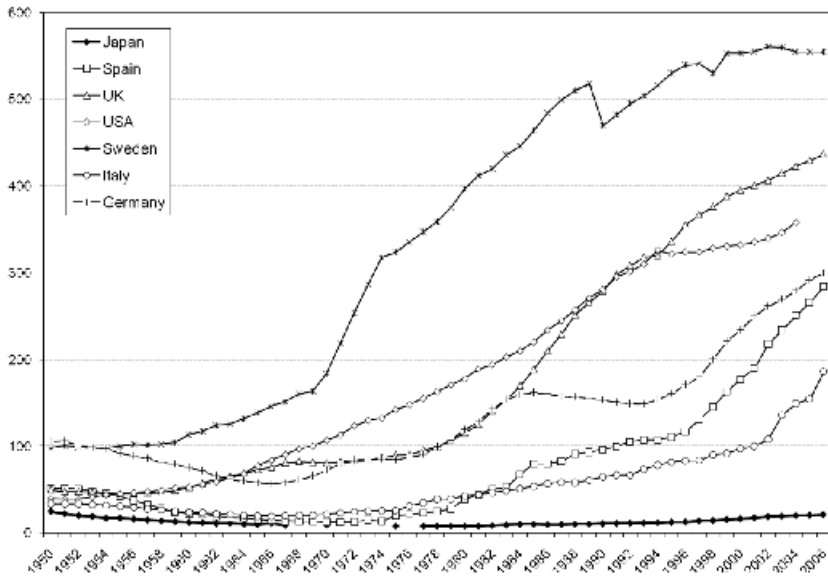


FIGURE 1.1. Illegitimate children per 1,000 children

SOURCE: Adapted from data provided by Professor David Coleman, Oxford. All the figures are from Eurostat, Council of Europe, U.S. Census Bureau, and Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (various years).

similar roots in a labor market environment unfavorable to single mothers, low welfare provision, and generally conservative family attitudes. An investigation of more recent survey data, however, reveals significant liberalization of most family-related trends including divorce. Marriages happen later, the association of sex and marriage has sunk into oblivion, the fertility rate is falling, families are getting smaller, and the numbers of cohabiting couples and single-person households are on the rise. If we look at the divorce rate, it is immediately obvious that Japan over the past half century has broadly followed trends of, and has now caught up with, Western industrialized countries (see Figure 1.2).¹⁵

One would expect women who consider carrying a premarital pregnancy to term to be under similar economic, social, and cultural pressures as would-be divorced mothers. Indeed, in most Western industrialized countries their numbers are comparable. For example, in the UK in 2006, 727,100 (45 percent) of all single-mother households were headed by unwed mothers and 508,970 (32 percent) by divorced mothers.¹⁶ In 2005, out of all U.S. single-mother households, 3,762,000 (42 percent) were headed by divorced mothers and 3,739,000 (42 percent) by never-married mothers.¹⁷ In Japan,

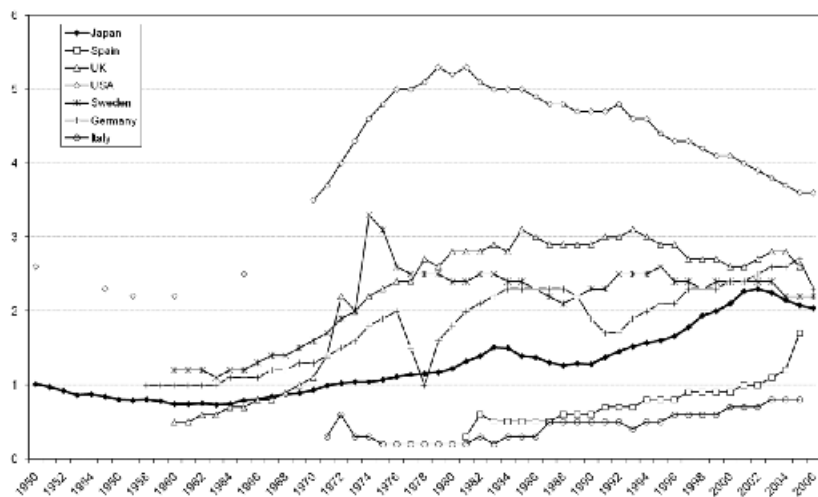


FIGURE 1.2. Crude divorce rate

SOURCES: Data from Eurostat, U.S. Census Bureau, and Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (various years).

however, divorced mothers are much more numerous than never-married ones. In 2006, 1,209,000 (79.7 percent) of all single-mother households were headed by divorced mothers compared to 102,000 (6.7 percent) headed by unwed mothers.¹⁸ These figures imply that there must be important differences in the decision-making process of potential divorcées and unwed mothers and that explanations lumping together divorce and illegitimacy trends are at the very least outdated. At the same time, the public fascination with unwed motherhood suggests that the choice of having children out of wedlock touches upon key social norms and values.

This book will provide an account of what it is to be an unwed mother in contemporary Japan and how women end up in this situation. This will tell us a great deal about the choices open to Japanese women and illuminate the institutional, social, legal, economic, and normative structures that make Japanese women cling to marriage so resolutely. As marriage age and the divorce rate are rising and fertility is plunging, studies documenting problems with as well as widespread skepticism about contemporary Japanese marriage proliferate. Yet in Japan the association of marriage and fertility has remained strong. At a time when other industrialized countries are searching for ways to encourage childbearing within marriage, Japan allows us to probe mechanisms that keep marriage and childbearing closely associated. It also throws the problems that this association can generate into particularly sharp relief.

Analyzing what women have seen as the most difficult obstacles facing unwed mothers is one of the best ways to tell what is believed to be essential for “normal” mothering, and hence opens a new perspective on the experiences of Japanese mothers and their children.

The Japanese case is also relevant against the background of the emerging positive association between nonmarital and overall fertility across industrialized countries in recent years.¹⁹ Understanding considerations that underlie childbearing decisions of Japanese unmarried women who find themselves pregnant may throw light on why Japan has been doing so well in competing for the title of the least fertile country in the world.

What Affects Marriage and Reproductive Decisions?

Although no research has been done specifically to investigate Japan’s very low illegitimacy rate over the past few decades, scholars have developed several theories of the changing patterns of family formation that could be applicable to Japan. The leading explanations cite women’s greater economic power, the increasing generosity of welfare, changing social attitudes, and social contagion.

Theories that see economic factors as the heart of the matter apply market logic to family research. This approach is most strongly associated with the name of Gary Becker, a Nobel Prize-winning economist.²⁰ According to Becker, marital unions are most attractive when spouses specialize: typically the wife in homemaking and the husband in labor market work. Growing labor market participation of women decreases specialization and thus, following Becker’s logic, the benefits of marriage. Hence, more women are encouraged to forego marriage.

Another line of theorizing, often called the welfare state hypothesis, suggests that the rise of extramarital fertility is the direct result of the growing state support for single mothers.²¹

Japanese women are still much more disadvantaged in the labor market than their Western counterparts. When it comes to welfare support for single mothers in OECD countries, Japan is firmly situated among the less-generous countries. As Chapter 3 will amply document, a Japanese single mother is rarely able to secure an income that would rival that of an average male earner; a Japanese woman would need to be severely deluded to imagine leading a welfare-supported life of leisure if she became a single mother.

Thus, economic theories predict a low birth rate outside wedlock in Japan since single motherhood is an economically disadvantageous decision. Yet, these theories also suggest that few women with children would divorce their husbands for the very same reason. This, however, has not been the case over the past decade. Since the magnitude of economic disadvantages faced

by divorced and unwed mothers is similar, why would their behavior be so different? As is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, economic theories fail to explain the large difference in the numbers of divorced and never-married mothers.

An alternative to the economic approach, the ideational theory of fertility, sees values and attitudes as the main explanation for changes in fertility in contemporary industrialized countries.²² The thrust of the ideational theory is that with the disappearance of traditional family values and rising affluence in the Western world, a strong commitment to individualism in everything, including family choices, became acceptable and more common, leading to, among other things, greater variation in family forms.²³

Again, in this general form the theory is powerless to explain the difference in divorce and illegitimacy trends in contemporary Japan. One study has argued that “enough [Japanese] women have assimilated messages of freedom and individual choice into their lives that marriage, birth, and divorce trends are being significantly affected.”²⁴ This is very much in line with the ideational theory and offers an explanation for the growing divorce rates and generally greater acceptance of single motherhood (Table 1.1).

The ideational theory, however, leaves open the question of why all these new values of freedom and individual choice have not yet changed the fact that almost all births in Japan happen within marriage.

The theories mentioned so far have one feature in common. They struggle to make sense of the huge difference in the numbers of divorced and unwed mothers. The advantage of the social contagion theory is that it is capable of accounting for such a difference.

The social contagion theory argues, in a nutshell, that the higher the expected level of childbearing outside marriage is in one’s reference group the greater the individual’s probability of having a child outside wedlock.²⁵ It has been applied recently by John Ermisch to explain the growth of illegitimacy in European countries.²⁶ Ermisch argues that the number of chil-

TABLE 1.1 Attitudes toward single motherhood in Japan

Year	N	<i>If a woman wants to have a child as a single parent but she doesn't want to have a stable relationship with a man, do you approve or disapprove? (%)</i>		
		<i>Approve</i>	<i>Disapprove</i>	<i>Depends</i>
1981	1,204	11.6	47	33.7
2005	1,044	21	35	43

SOURCE: World Values Survey 2000, www.worldvaluessurvey.org/ (accessed 20.12.2008).

dren born outside wedlock is driven upward by the spread of cohabitation: the more women choose to cohabit in any given society the less formidable the prospect of cohabitation instead of immediate marriage appears to other women who face the decision between cohabitation and marriage. Ermisch supports his argument by demonstrating the strong association between the levels of cohabitation and illegitimacy in sixteen European countries. Cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages, so many of the children who start their lives in cohabiting unions eventually end up growing up with single unwed mothers. The spread of cohabiting unions is likely to make women less willing to compromise and marry someone just to avoid giving birth outside wedlock. In light of these findings, the still relatively low rates of cohabitation and rarity of unwed mothers in contemporary Japan could be the reason why having a child outside marriage is such a difficult decision. Yet, although cohabitation rates have been going up rapidly in the past few years,²⁷ there has been no corresponding boom in out-of-wedlock childbearing. Thus if cohabitation does promote premarital pregnancies, these seem to get absorbed by shotgun marriages or perhaps abortions.²⁸

Given the similarity in the numbers of divorced and unwed mothers in Western industrialized countries, it is also conceivable that the growth of divorce there fueled the growth of illegitimacy. In Japan, however, as we will see in Chapter 5, unwed mothers are viewed and view themselves as very different from divorcées, and the growing divorce rate seems to have had little effect on their numbers.

If in Japan only knowing other unwed mothers, but not cohabiting couples or divorcées, increases one's likelihood of having a child outside marriage, then the social contagion theory suggests a good explanation of why recently many more women have opted for divorce rather than for having a child outside wedlock. Divorce has become so widespread that these days most people personally know at least one divorcée.²⁹ On the other hand, unwed mothers are rare; moreover, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, many such women choose to pass for divorcées. In these circumstances, the social contagion theory would predict that many more women would think it possible for themselves to have a divorce than an illegitimate child.

The major generic problem with the social contagion theory is that it cannot elucidate the beginning of any particular trend. It can be reasonably assumed to be at work only after a noticeable proportion of the population starts displaying a certain behavior. There are so few unwed mothers in Japan that it is unlikely to be relevant. In Chapter 5 I investigate whether, then, it is the opposite of social contagion—stigmatization—that prevents Japanese women from having children outside wedlock. As we will see, while stigmatization is still an important factor, its influence has been

reduced considerably over the past decades. Thus it can only act as an auxiliary explanatory mechanism.

Altogether, the theories developed from Western data are insufficient to explain the very low illegitimacy rates in Japan. This book's detailed analysis of interviews with sixty-eight unwed mothers offers novel insights into how social norms and economic considerations interact and are played out in reproductive and family formation decisions in a crucial outlier case among industrialized countries. Unwed motherhood is such a potentially costly step that it brings out these considerations most explicitly.³⁰ Rather than relying on any one theory, this book documents the stories unwed mothers tell, what they believed made it easier for them to have children outside wedlock, and what made their decisions more difficult.

Making the Choice

As economist Reiner Eichenberger notes, "having a child, instead of remaining childless, binds the time and financial resources of the parents for about 20 years, perhaps even for the rest of their lives."³¹ I would also add that the costs of having a child are not only heavy, but also unpredictable, as it is impossible to tell how the child will turn out when the decision whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term has to be made. Thus the decision is a complex one, influenced by many factors. This book tries to do justice to this complexity.

The chapters are organized around the clusters of women's considerations. Chapter 2 documents the pregnancy solutions potentially open to premaritally pregnant women, namely, marriage, abortion, giving up the child, and rearing the child outside wedlock. Women rarely become unwed mothers in Japan by design. Their decision-making process is usually a lengthy and painful one—which opens a unique analytical window for us. The ideal of marriage is often desperately fought for. In a striking reversal of Western norms, both unwed mothers and those around them often feel that few fates—including growing up with unhappily married parents or, when marriage is unavailable, abortion—are worse for a child than illegitimacy.

In Chapter 3 we will see how women's solutions and desires are constrained by the economic environment. This chapter offers the first detailed scholarly account of the ways economic institutions and policies affect single unwed mothers. Throughout the chapter all discussions of policies and institutions are evaluated through my interviewees' opinions about and experiences with them. Interestingly, many of the women found out the specific entitlements and penalties of their choice only after they had a child.

Chapter 4 analyzes the treatment of unwed mothers in the legal system. Like Chapter 3, the main finding is that few women were aware of the difficulties unwed mothers face in the legal system, with the exception of the discrimination they suffer through the family registry system. Moreover, we will see that the legal treatment of unwed mothers improved substantially over the past decade.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the stigmatization and shame associated with unwed motherhood. We will see that while both are important, most unwed mothers were successful in avoiding stigma and shaming by passing for divorcées.

Chapter 6 recounts the fears and dreams women have for their children, drastically reflecting the high value that most of my interviewees accorded to marriage. The key ingredient of the insecurity my interviewees felt during pregnancy, insecurity that led them to yearn for marriage and pushed many of them close to abortion, was their concern about the effect illegitimacy would have on their children's lives.

Methodology

DEFINITION

I define single unwed mothers as mothers who have never been legally married to the father of at least one of their children³² and who have assumed the primary responsibility for the emotional and material well-being of their child(ren) due to the absence of a male partner.

In defining single motherhood the trickiest question is after what level of contact with the father of her child(ren) or another man should one presume that a woman is not raising her child(ren) alone. Being reluctant to decide upon this question arbitrarily, I relied on two criteria: women's self-definition, and absence of cohabitation.

In the majority of the interviews, defining women as unwed mothers was relatively straightforward. The women lived alone or with their parents, assumed the primary responsibility for the well-being of their children, and were not in any contact with the fathers of their children. Several cases were more complicated, however. Megumi for a long time lived separately from her daughter and only visited her twice a year, during summer and winter vacations.³³ She chose to fully rely on her own parents to raise her daughter till the age of eighteen. Kyoko left her daughter in the care of the parents of the daughter's biological father and only visited her occasionally. Finally, five women were in close contact with the fathers of their children and received extensive financial and childcare support from them. None of these women could be defined as single unwed mothers in the strictest sense, though that is what they were *de jure*. Interviews with them were invaluable for

understanding to what extent the difficulties in making a choice to become an unwed mother stem from the expected practical disadvantages and to what extent from the status of an unwed mother itself.

RESEARCH METHODS

I have chosen to rely primarily on qualitative methods for this project for several reasons. To this day little academic research has been done on unwed mothers in contemporary Japan and qualitative research is known to be invaluable in mapping out uncharted areas. The unique contribution of this book is its individual-level analysis, which offers us glimpses of the internalized beliefs that inform decisions. Finally, qualitative research has long proved to be the most suitable for studying sensitive issues.³⁴ In addition to my own primary qualitative research, I also rely on secondary quantitative sources to document the environment in which individual decisions take place in Japan and offer comparisons with other industrialized democracies whenever these are illuminating.³⁵

THE SAMPLE

My fieldwork was carried out within eleven months between the end of June 2004 and early May 2005. I conducted sixty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews with single unwed mothers and two unmarried women who were both in the last trimester of their pregnancies and expected to become unwed mothers. The interviews lasted between one and five hours. In my interviews I concentrated on the period of pregnancy: what the women were worried about; when and how they made their choice as to how to deal with the pregnancy; was there anyone who had a particular effect on their decision; what they perceived as the biggest obstacle to bearing an illegitimate child before the child was actually born and what helped them most to decide to have an illegitimate child; when and how they told people around them about the child; what reactions they expected, and so on. I also carried out interviews with two small comparison groups: divorcées and unmarried women with no children.

I interviewed twelve women who had divorced or separated from their husbands before their child reached 1 year of age. These women were for all practical considerations in a position very similar to that of single unwed mothers. They had to make a living and take care of a baby at the same time. The child was so small at the time the parents separated that he or she would not remember the father. The difference in fathers' child support payments to ex-wives as compared to ex-lovers is not very large.³⁶ Crucially, analysis of interviews with this control group allowed me to compare the ways unwed-mothers-to-be and divorcées-to-be made decisions to become single mothers. This comparison helped to tease out the differences

between divorce and unwed motherhood in public on the one hand and self-perceptions on the other.

Finally, I interviewed sixteen women who were over 34 years old, not married, and had no children. These women were approaching a situation when there was a serious chance that they might lose their ability to have children and thus remain forever childless. My interviews with them concentrated on whether they ever considered having a child outside wedlock and if yes or no then why. Unwed mothers are women who resolved their pregnancies very atypically. The interviews with this control group allowed me to gauge whether there was any difference in accounts about real and hypothetical resolutions of premarital pregnancies. This comparison was important because I asked unwed mothers about their decisions post-factum, and such an arrangement is potentially fraught with rationalizations. Interviews with childless unmarried women allowed me to hypothesize about the extent to which the sentiments and considerations of unwed mothers were shared by women who did not make such an extreme decision. The sixteen unmarried childless women interviewed are likely to be more representative of Japanese women in general, hence the interviews allow one to test whether unwed mothers' types of considerations and values are atypical or, in their fundamental outlines, shared by other Japanese women.

Sample Recruitment

The biggest survey sample of unwed mothers available at the time of the field research was that from the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JIL) survey and comprised eighty-nine women.³⁷ Lack of a survey based on a bigger random sample of unwed mothers meant that it was impossible even to aim at a representative sample of unwed mothers; there was no benchmark for evaluation.³⁸ Moreover, for exploratory research, variability is more important than the representativeness of the sample. Thus, my main aim when generating the sample was to achieve as much diversity as possible.

• Unwed mothers

To ensure diversity I used several ways of contacting interviewees. First of all, I got introductions from three lobby groups: Shinguru Mazā Fōramu (Single Mothers' Forum), hereafter SMF; Konsakai; and Nakusō Koseki to Kongaishi Sabetsu Kōryūkai (Let's Eliminate Family Registry and Illegitimacy Associated Discrimination Association), hereafter Kōryūkai.

SMF³⁹ is a group that provides support and lobbies for the rights and benefits of single mothers in general. In 2004–5 SMF reported to have about six hundred fee-paying members.⁴⁰ SMF was established in the 1980s and is said to have had as many as eight hundred fee-paying members from all of Japan in its best years. These days getting new members has become more

difficult, and this is reflected in the demographic composition of the group. The most active members of the group are in their forties or older.⁴¹ At the regular meetings there was a maximum of about thirty members present, and more often there were about ten. All the interviewees I was introduced to at Single Mothers' Forum were in their mid-thirties or older. In 2004–2005 the headquarters of SMF were based in Tokyo and there were active subgroups in the Kansai area and Fukuoka city.⁴²

Konsakai⁴³ (based in the Kansai area) and Kōryūkai (based in Tokyo)⁴⁴ are organizations lobbying for the rights of unmarried mothers and illegitimate children. Cohabiting couples made up a large proportion of the membership of these groups. Konsakai had about two hundred fee-paying members in 2004–2005 and its only regular activity was publishing a monthly newsletter. Like SMF, Konsakai had few young members. Kōryūkai is a very active movement fighting legal discrimination against illegitimate children. Tanaka Sumiko, the head of the group, was the person who started the court trials that eventually led to a change in the way illegitimate children are recorded in the family and residential registries (see Chapter 4).⁴⁵

Active members of these three organizations introduced me to eleven interviewees. Four more were enlisted through snowballing from these initial contacts. Recognizing the potential bias inherent in contacting interviewees through activist groups, I asked SMF, Kōryūkai, and a then active internet chat room for single mothers (Shinguru Mazā Kaigishitsu)⁴⁶ to put information about my research with my contact details on their websites. As a result of advertising my research this way, I got to know and was able to interview forty-one unwed mothers.

I found twelve more of my interviewees in six Mother and Child Living Support Facilities (*Boshi Seikatsu Shien Shisetsu*). Mother and Child Living Support Facilities provide free housing and broad care, ranging from childrearing support to psychological care; job-search support (in one place even job introductions); basic life skills training; and so on. Only single mothers with children below 18 years of age are eligible to stay. In 2006 there were 281 such facilities in Japan, containing about four thousand single-mother households. As these figures suggest, only a small minority of a total 1,517,000 single mother households can be housed in the Living Support Facilities. Typically, single mothers who gain entry have problems beyond simply being the sole breadwinners and childcarers of their families: in 2006 about a half ran away from violent partners, a fifth could not find a suitable place to live, 14 percent had financial problems.⁴⁷ The geographical location of facilities that cooperated with my research was as follows: two in Tokyo, one in Kyoto, two in Tottori, and one in Kurayoshi.⁴⁸

- Divorcées

I accumulated my sample of divorcées through Mother and Child Living Support Facilities, introductions from my acquaintances from SMF, and responses to my advertisements on the internet.

- Unmarried childless women over thirty-four

I got introductions to these women through personal acquaintances, through the Oxford Alumni Society in Tokyo, and through snowballing.

Sample Characteristics

- Unwed mothers

In my search for interviewees I strove for variation in such categories as age, income, education, employment type, and residence at the time the decision about childbirth was made.⁴⁹ The age of my interviewees at the time of the interview ranged from 19 to 73 (average age being 38.2, median age 36) (see Table 1.2).

Age at childbirth ranged from 16 to 44 (average age at birth being 30.9, median age 32). I strove to get women with as young children as possible since children's outcomes, their performance in school, their progression to higher education, their own evaluation of their happiness once they can convey it, and the like, may affect women's evaluations of their choices. While one cannot avoid issues of post hoc rationalization completely, concentrating on women with young children allowed me to limit the amount of rationalization connected with children's outcomes. This consideration, however, led to a trade-off: women's age is inevitably loosely correlated with the age of their children because women are fertile only for a limited number of years. Consequently, interviewing older women to fulfill the aim of age diversity inevitably resulted in interviewing some women with older children.

I also managed to achieve considerable diversity on the income variable. The lowest income in my sample was 0 (not even receiving any welfare support), and the the highest was 12 million yen (about \$109,100) a year (see Table 1.3).⁵⁰ Average income in my sample was 2.7 million yen (about \$24,500) a year, and median income was 2.4 million yen a year (about

TABLE 1.2 Age variation of unwed mothers in my sample

Age groups	19-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50 and over
Number of women	2	6	11	24	10	8	7

SOURCE: Author's interviews.

TABLE 1.3 Earnings distribution (million yen) of unwed mothers in my sample

Yearly earnings per family member	No earnings (incl. welfare recipients)			
		0–0.83*	0.83–1.62**	Above 1.62
Number of women	14	12	19	23

SOURCE: Author's interviews.

* 0.83 million yen a year = average income per family member in lone-mother families

** 1.62 million yen a year = average income per family member in a family with at least one child (see MHIW, 2006e).

\$22,000) (compared to 2.3 million yen a year in the above-mentioned sample of eighty-nine cases from the Japan Institute for Labour and Policy Training). To compare, in 2004 the income of an average household was 5.804 million yen (about \$52,700) a year, and the income of an average household with at least one child was 7.149 million yen (about \$64,900) a year.⁵¹

Types of employment were also fairly varied among my interviewees. Forty-four percent of the unwed mothers I interviewed were employed full time, 31 percent had various non-full-time working arrangements, 6 percent were self-employed, and 19 percent were unemployed.⁵² The education characteristics of my interviewees also varied considerably. I interviewed a range of women, from those who only graduated from junior high school (compulsory education in Japan), to those who had doctoral degrees (see Table 1.4).⁵³

My interviewees also came from very diverse family backgrounds. Their fathers' occupations ranged from farmers and plumbers to a board member of a big TV company and a CEO of a large company.⁵⁴

In terms of geographical distribution, I interviewed women in the urbanized Kansai⁵⁵ and Kantō⁵⁶ areas, as well as the more provincial Fukuoka prefecture and predominantly rural Tottori prefecture. These locations were chosen in order to get views and experiences of single unwed mothers in big cities, towns, and rural areas.⁵⁷

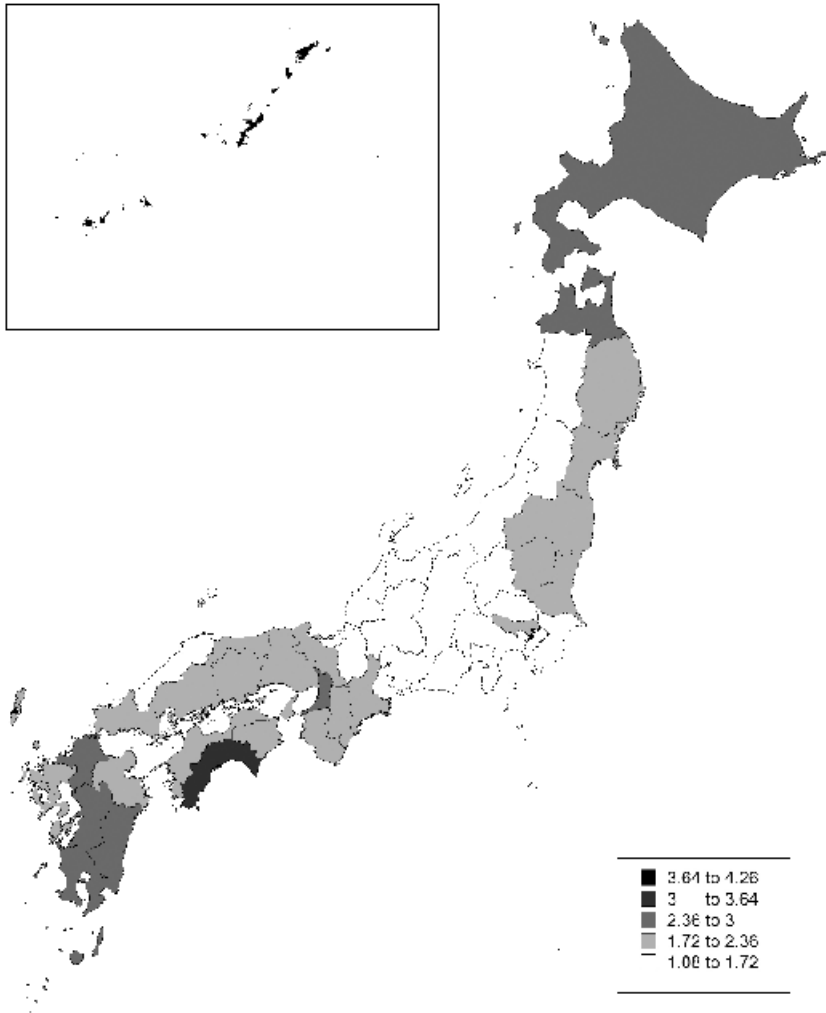
Generally, the higher the population of the prefecture the more women have children outside wedlock (see Map 1.1).⁵⁸

TABLE 1.4 Highest level of education completed by unwed mothers in my sample

Education	Junior high school	High school	Vocational school	College	University
Number of women	8	23	9	5	23

SOURCE: Author's interviews.

The likelihood of having a child outside wedlock, however, does not depend on how populated the prefecture is, but rather on whether a woman lives in an urban area or in the countryside. Using a recent panel survey, Iwasawa and Mita have shown that out-of-wedlock childbearing is most prevalent in urban areas, particularly in towns, and least common in the countryside, where shotgun marriages prevail.⁵⁹



MAP I.1. Percent of illegitimate births out of all births by prefecture, 2004

SOURCE: MHIW, 2005a.

- Divorcées and unmarried childless women

Both divorcées and unmarried, childless women were relatively marginal for my research, but I still strove to achieve variability in the samples so as to be able to compare their views with those of unwed mothers.

The age of the divorcées I interviewed ranged from twenty-one to fifty-two, and their age at childbirth ranged from nineteen to thirty-three. In level of education, the divorcées' ranged from junior high school graduates to university graduates with advanced degrees. Some of them had only part-time jobs and some were employed full time. Their average income was 2.5 million yen (about \$22,700) a year.

The age of the unmarried women with no children ranged from thirty-four to fifty-six. In level of education, they varied from high school graduates to university graduates. The sample included both part-time and full-time employees. Their average income was 6.3 million yen (about \$57,300) a year.⁶⁰

This study is distinctive in two ways. First, it is the first in-depth study based on such a large and diverse sample of unwed mothers in Japan. Second, it also is the first to systematically investigate unwed mothers who were not part of any institutional or activist network.⁶¹ As only a minority of unwed mothers have experience of living in institutions, and as membership of all support groups reportedly is falling, this study addresses the crucial issue of looking at the less visible, but more numerous group of unwed mothers without institutional or activist affiliation.

I chose to limit this study to women's experiences. Women's information about whether they are pregnant or not is much better than their partners'. Moreover, until a certain stage, in most cases it is up to a woman whether to inform her partner about the pregnancy or not. In societies such as Japan where abortion is effectively available on demand, this puts a great deal of power over pregnancy resolution into women's hands. That is why in my research I decided to concentrate on the way women make choices about whether to carry a premarital pregnancy to term or not, and pay less attention to their partners' opinions. For information about partners, I primarily relied on women's accounts. Our understanding of the reproductive decisions of premaritally pregnant women, however, will benefit from a separate detailed study of the attitudes and behavior of the men responsible for the pregnancies.

THE CONDUCTING AND ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The interviewer affects the interview in many ways. Many of my respondents solicited information about my age and gender before agreeing to be interviewed, thus suggesting that these categories may have affected their decisions whether to talk to me or not. I was also often asked whether I am

an unwed mother myself. After it transpired I was not, I was asked whether I intend to become one. This repeated questioning suggested that unwed mothers were sensitive to my marital status. Thus the fact that I was a young, unmarried woman probably had some effect on the stories I was told and the selection of women I was able to interview.

Of all my personal characteristics, however, my obvious foreignness probably had the most effect. That I am not Japanese seemed to put me outside my interviewees' frame of reference and often appeared to infuse me with objectivity from their point of view. I believe that my identity as an outsider in Japanese society had a positive effect on the women's willingness to tell their stories.

After I finished the fieldwork, all the interviews were transcribed by me and then analyzed using a grounded theory approach with the help of Max-QDA, qualitative data analysis software that I largely used in its Code-and-Retrieve capacity.⁶²