

Unmarried Single Mothers in Japan: Three Suggested Typologies

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INTRODUCTION

Households consisting of a single mother and her children comprise about 2% of all households in contemporary Japan¹, representing a small, but growing minority: the total number of single mother households has increased from its low point of 515,300 in 1967 to 954,900 in 1998.² Unmarried single mothers comprise a minority within that minority, the most common route to single motherhood being divorce. Because of their small numbers, unmarried single mothers are difficult to contact and so have been largely ignored by researchers in Japan or subsumed into the category of “separated” lone mothers. Moreover, the rapid increase in divorce in recent years has focussed attention on the divorced single mother family. Thus, little is known about unmarried single mothers. However, a recent Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey showed that the number of unmarried single mothers had increased 85% in the period 1993~98, suggesting an important change is taking place in gender relationships. This paper presents the results of an interview survey revealing details about the lives and conditions of unmarried single mothers which are generally obscured by larger surveys, such as those carried out by the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry. Interviews covered the unmarried single mothers’ experiences before and after the birth of

¹中田 1997:209.

²厚生労働省 2001:2.

their children, in as much depth as possible, including how the interviewee managed at that time of her pregnancy and since. Analysis of the information obtained from the interviews suggests that unmarried single mothers have various strategies for coping with their situation, and these strategies are used to suggest typologies.

The number of single mothers and their route to single motherhood has changed drastically in the post-war period. After the Second World War, the majority of single mothers were widows, but since 1961, the total number and relative proportion of widowed single mothers has steadily decreased: they accounted for 77% of the total in 1961, decreasing to 18.7% in 1998. Divorce has been the most important route to single motherhood in Japan since the early 1980s. The number of couples divorcing per thousand of the population has increased from 0.9 in 1960 to 1.78 in 1997.³ Of course, divorce in Japan does not

Table 1: Number and percentage of single mothers in Japan by year of survey⁴

Year	Total	Widowed	Separated			
			Subtotal	Divorced	Unmarried	Other
1952	694,700	590,900	103,700	52,400	11,200	40,100
1956	1,150,000	896,000	254,000	168,000	22,000	64,000
1961	1,029,000	793,000	236,000	173,000	20,000	43,000
1967	515,300	351,100	164,200	122,100	9,400	32,800
1973	626,200	387,300	238,900	165,100	15,300	58,500
1978	633,700	316,100	317,500	240,100	30,300	47,100
1983	718,100	259,300	458,700	352,500	38,300	67,900
1988	849,200	252,300	596,900	529,100	30,400	37,300
1993	789,900	194,500	578,400	507,600	37,500	33,400
1998	954,900	178,800	763,100	655,600	69,300	40,200
Percentages (%)						
1952	100	85.1	14.9	7.5	1.6	5.8
1956	100	77.9	22.1	14.6	1.9	5.6
1961	100	77.1	22.9	16.8	1.9	4.2
1967	100	68.1	31.9	23.7	1.8	6.4
1973	100	61.9	38.2	26.4	2.4	9.4
1978	100	49.9	50.1	37.9	4.8	7.4
1983	100	36.1	63.9	49.1	5.3	9.5
1988	100	29.7	70.3	62.3	3.6	4.4
1993	100	24.6	73.2	64.3	4.7	4.2
1998	100	18.7	79.9	68.4	7.3	4.2

³ 井上・江原 1999:17.

⁴ Compositied from 厚生省 1995:2 and 厚生労働省 2001:2.

necessarily result in the formation of single parent households: 40.2% of divorces occurred between childless couples in 1997.⁵

While the divorce rate has steadily increased since the 1960s, the exnuptial birth rate has remained consistently low over the same period, and concomitantly the number of unmarried single mothers. As Table 1 shows, despite the recent increase, unmarried single mothers made up only 7.2% of all single mothers in 1998. The ratio of exnuptial births as a percentage of all births has stayed near 1% since the 1960s, having decreased from a peak of 9.4% at the beginning of the Taisho period, to its lowest point in 1965 with 0.8%.⁶ Cohabitation is not yet a widespread choice for living arrangements in Japan, suppressing the exnuptial birth rate.

SECTION II: SURVEY METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews with a small number of unmarried single mothers were chosen as the survey method because they provide details about the women's lives that are obscured by demographic or mass surveys, and they allow analysis of the relation between individual women's lives and wider society. The criteria for inclusion in the study were that the interviewee had at least one exnuptial child under the age of eighteen, had never been married to the father(s) of the child(ren) and was living entirely or mainly without the support of the father(s) of the child(ren), or the support of any other partner. I interviewed seventeen unmarried single mothers in the Kansai region of western Japan: eight interviewees lived in Kyoto city, six in Osaka city, two in Kobe city and one in rural Hyogo.

⁵ 井上・江原 1999:19.

⁶ 善積 1992:126-127.

The survey was carried out over a period of almost a year, from August 1998 to June 1999. Each person was interviewed twice. The first interview covered mainly the practical details of the interviewees' daily lives, work history, income and household composition. The first interview began with the completion of a one-page chart showing the interviewee's age, occupation, place of residence, educational history, special skills or qualifications, and health, for each of the people resident with the interviewee, plus the interviewee's parents and the father(s) of her child(ren). This was intended to give an idea of the social background of the interviewee and her family and also an indication of whether family members were close enough and healthy enough to be of practical support to the interviewee and her child(ren).

Interviewees were questioned about their employment history, after leaving school or college graduation, to reveal changes brought about by the birth of their child or children. Extending the scope of discussion beyond the present job to include a linear work history clarifies the strategies used by the interviewee, particularly around the time of the pregnancy. The interview then proceeded to the following topics: current income, savings, social welfare benefits received by the interviewee and her children, plus any changes over time; a description of the current housing situation and any changes; some details about the child(ren)'s father(s); details of any previous marriages or long-term relationships. Support from friends and family, especially with respect to childcare, was covered, as well as participation in or contact with support groups and political activist groups. The first interview was generally shorter than the second, lasting about one hour.

The second interview was an opportunity to hear the interviewee's opinions and experiences. It was carried out after a period of several days or weeks had passed since the first interview, with an average of one to two weeks between the two

interviews. The second interview was mainly an opportunity to hear opinions and experiences. After a reassessment of the facts gained in the first interview, specific questions were prepared relating to the experiences of the particular interviewee, as well as to clarify any apparent ambiguities. Activities, such as those covered in the first interview, are much easier to talk about and document than feelings and values, so the familiarity gained on both sides during the first interview facilitated a later depth of questioning. During the second interview, the interviewees were invited to speak freely about any experiences they felt were important or to cover any topics that had been neglected previously. The second interview took at least one hour, but in some cases extended to several hours. More sensitive topics, such as abortion, contraception and the relationship with the child(ren)'s father(s) were addressed. Various open-ended questions were asked, such as "What has been the biggest problem so far?" "What has been the best thing so far?" "Do you have any regrets about becoming an unmarried mother?" and "What hopes do you have for the child(ren)'s future?"

There was immense difficulty in finding interviewees, partly due to the small number of the target group, but also because of the stigma surrounding unmarried single motherhood, which means that many of these women are unable to speak openly about their situation. I contacted a number of organisations with interest in either single parents issues or legal issues concerning children born outside marriage, asking for introductions to unmarried single mothers, and was eventually able to contact several women. I contacted several other women through personal introductions by friends and acquaintances. I interviewed six women, three in Kyoto and three in Osaka, who were living in Mother and Child Welfare Facilities (*boshi fukushi shisetsu*, 母子福祉施設, formerly known as *boshiryō* 母子寮). These interviewees cannot necessarily be considered a representative sample of unmarried mothers living in the welfare facilities, since

the staff introduced them because of their potential ability to answer my questions. Some of the residents have mental disabilities or other problems that would have made the interviews difficult.

DATA FROM INTERVIEWS

This section summarizes the information obtained during the interviews, and compares this information with data obtained in other surveys, in particular the five-yearly survey carried out by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. The “typical” single mother in a survey by Nakata⁷ was divorced, living in a private apartment on a low income and had small children in daycare. Generally, the women interviewed by Nakata had a short length of education, had children early and had poor working conditions, leading to poverty and the need for public support when they became single mothers. However, the information obtained during the interviews for the present survey shows a much more complex picture for unmarried single mothers.

Profiles

Three of the women interviewed for this survey were divorced and two of these had had children inside the marriage. All later had exnuptial children with other partners. Four of the women had cohabited with the father of their children, at least briefly; in one case, the child's father commuted between his marital family and his second family. One interviewee had cohabited with someone other than the father of her children. Nine of the women had never married and never cohabited with a man.

⁷中田 1997:104-114.

The ages of the interviewees at the time of interview varied widely from 26 to 53 years. Two interviewees were in the range 20-29 years, four in the range 30-39 years, 10 in the range 40-49 and one was over 50. The average age for all interviewees was 39.65 years, similar to the average age of 39.5 years for divorced and separated (*seibetsu*, 生別) single mothers recorded in the Japanese Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey carried out in 1998. The average age of widowed single mothers was slightly older at 46.8 years, giving an overall average of 40.9 years for single mothers nationally.

The interviewees in this survey almost all became unmarried single mothers at the point of their child's birth and thus became single mothers at a younger age than other types of single mother generally. The average age of first exnuptial childbirth for the women in this survey was 30.54 years. In comparison, the average age at which women became single mothers in the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey is 34.7 years for all single mothers, or 33.4 years for separated and divorced women and 39.9 years for widows.⁸ They had generally experienced several years of marriage before becoming single mothers. The average age at first marriage for a Japanese woman was 26.2 years and the average age for first childbirth was 27.4 years in 1994.⁹

Academic Background

The academic backgrounds of the interviewees varied widely, from non-completion of high school to graduate school study. Three interviewees didn't complete high school; one completed middle school, and then attended beauty school; three interviewees were high school graduates; one graduated high school, and then did further study at private language school. Two interviewees

⁸ 厚生労働省 2001:3.

⁹ 中田 1997:105.

completed junior college (11.8%), then nursing school. One interviewee entered university, but didn't complete, while three interviewees were university graduates (23.5%). Two interviewees graduated university, and then did postgraduate study abroad, and one interviewee completed a Master's course in Japan, a ratio of 17.6% compared with an average of 5.1% for all Japanese women in 1995, giving a total of seven interviewees (41.2%) who progressed to university, compared with an average of 22.9% for all Japanese women in 1995.¹⁰

Several of the interviewees progressed to further education after having a child, in order to improve prospects for the family: two went to nursing school, and one obtained her teacher's license by attending teacher training college part-time. Educational achievement, including further study can clearly be seen as a resource which helps the unmarried single mother to achieve independence. Lower educational achievement leads to an inability to earn sufficient income to support the family and therefore a reliance on welfare, showing the importance of further education for single mothers.

The Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey does not give figures for the educational achievements of all single mothers, but the sample interviewed by Nakata, who were mostly divorced, had lower level of education overall than the national average for Japanese women.¹¹ In their sample, there were ten middle school graduates (or 24.4%, whereas only 3% of all Japanese women do not go on to high school), fifteen high school graduates, six technical college graduates, three junior college graduates and seven university graduates (or 17.1% compared to the national average of 22.9% for all Japanese women). The four

¹⁰井上・江原 1999:139. It should be noted that the figure was much lower when some of the interviewees were university students. Only 6.5% of women went to university in 1970, increasing to 12.3% in 1980 and 15.2% in 1990. 井上・江原 1999:139.

¹¹中田 1997:105-6.

unmarried single mothers in Nakata's survey showed the same bipolar distribution as the present survey: one middle school graduate, one technical college graduate and two university graduates.

Interviewees' Children

The interviewees in this survey had between one and three children: twelve had 1 child, three had 2 children and two had 3 children. One of the interviewees gave birth to two children inside marriage, and another child outside marriage after divorce, and another interviewee had one exnuptial and one marital child. When taking into consideration exnuptial children only, 14 of the women in this survey (82.4%) had only one exnuptial child, a significantly greater proportion than the average number of children for single mother households, where 41.9% have only one child. This suggests the problems in bearing an exnuptial as a single mother: having had one exnuptial child, it is just too difficult to bear others. The average number of children per married couple was 2.21 in 1997.¹²

The children's ages at the time of the mother's interview in this study ranged from less than one year to 21 years, with an average of 9.25 years. However, there is a clear bipolar spread of ages, with no child in the 9 to 11 age group. The majority of the children (64.7%) were aged 8 or under and 35.3% were aged between 12 and 17 years. Thus, the interviewees' families were younger on average than the average in the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey, which gives only the age of the youngest child in the household, which shows that 31.8 % of all single mother households had children under the age of 8; while 23.5% of the interviewees in this survey have children aged 2 or under, the figure for the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey is only 7.1% of the total.¹³

¹² 井上・江原 1999:5.

¹³ 厚生労働省 2001:3.

The survey shows that the average age of the youngest child at the time the family became a single mother family is 5.4 years old.¹⁴ As mentioned above, the interviewees in this survey were generally single mothers from the birth of their child onwards. Since the needs for single mothers with infants are different from those with older children, particularly childcare needs, this suggests that the needs of unmarried mothers as a group should to be addressed separately.

In this study, pre-primary school children of interviewees accounted for 52.4% of the total, as opposed to 14.6% of the national total for all single mothers.¹⁵ Seven were in day care (63.6%), three had yet to start day care, one had been in day care but the mother found it unsuitable (36.4%). None were in kindergarten. Nationally, 52.6% of the pre-primary school children of single mothers were in day care, 8.9% in kindergarten, 22.3% were cared for by the mother, and 11.3% by other family members.¹⁶ Single mothers generally, and the interviewees in this survey in particular, are unable to take up the option of kindergarten, which requires that the mother has short working hours or is a full-time carer. Most do not have sufficient financial income to allow this possibility. Day care, on the other hand, is aimed at working mothers. The hours vary between cities and between different day care centres, but they are usually open by about 8:30am and the children can stay until about 5pm. Some have longer opening hours, or may give permission for children to stay for extended hours on an individual basis determined by need. Four of the children of the interviewees were in primary school, and three were at middle school and three at high school. Two of the older children (ages 21 and 20) were living separately from the mother in order to go to university and one child (age 21) was working and living independently.

¹⁴ 厚生労働省 2001:3.

¹⁵ 厚生労働省 2001:13.

¹⁶ 厚生労働省 2001:14.

In these cases, there were other children still dependent on the mother.

Housing Conditions

At the time the interviews took place, two interviewees were living in public housing (11.8%), six were living in Mother and Child Welfare Facilities (35.2%), three were in private rented accommodation (17.6%), five were living in apartments or houses that they own or jointly own (29.4%) and one was living in her family home (5.9%). The number of homeowners among the interviewees compares favourably with the rate of 17.3% home ownership for divorced and separated single mothers in the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey carried out in 1998.¹⁷ By comparison, 66.7% of widowed single mother families were owner-occupiers in 1998, similar to the rate of 60.2% of all households in Japan in 1995, with the rest living in various forms of rental accommodation.¹⁸ The number of interviewees living in public housing was lower than the average for all single mothers (as shown in the table below, 16.6%). Lone mothers are sometimes given priority on public housing, which tends to have very low rent, but is often difficult to obtain because it is allocated by lottery.

*Table 2: Living conditions for single mothers in Japan in 1998 (percentages)*¹⁹

	Home owner	Rented accommodation				
		Public	Public corporation	Private rented	Shared	Other*
Total	26.6	16.6	3.1	25.9	13.6	12.6
Widowed	66.7	10.1	1.5	12.0	5.4	3.9
Divorced/ Separated	17.3	18.1	3.6	29.3	15.6	14.8
This survey	29.4	11.8	0	17.6	5.9	35.2

* "Other" includes those living in workplace accommodation and rented rooms.

The Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey does not indicate what

¹⁷ 厚生労働省 2001:6.

¹⁸ 厚生労働省 2001:6.

¹⁹ 厚生労働省 2001:6.

percentage of families are living in institutional surroundings, such as Mother and Child Welfare Facilities, but shows that 1.6% of all single mother families have used or were using the facilities in 1998.²⁰ In 1994, there were 313 such facilities in Japan, housing 4421 people²¹, amounting to a very small percentage of all households in Japan. Thus, the number of interviewees living in institutional facilities can be assumed to be much larger than usual for single mothers in general.

Apart from death of a spouse, there are various possible conditions of eligibility for a single mother and her family to enter the facilities: a spouse's disappearance; abandonment by a spouse; domestic violence; non-support by a spouse living overseas; chronic mental or physical illness or disability, which makes a spouse unable to support the family; spousal imprisonment. Single mother families are not necessarily obliged to enter the facilities, but they may be forced to do so if social workers deem it necessary. The facilities have a role in reuniting children with their mothers: a significant proportion of children in the facilities (20.6%) in a 1985 survey were able to begin living with their mothers by entering the facilities, having previously lived with other relatives, friends or in children's institutions.²² These facilities are generally reserved for the most problematic cases, such as those experiencing domestic violence, mental disability or destitution, due to lack of resources to increase the number of facilities, and because of a trend away from institutionalisation. They are often found to be unsatisfactory and restrictive by the women who live there.

The welfare facilities which I visited were similar in outward appearance to an

²⁰ 厚生労働省 2001:16.

²¹ 中田 1997:28.

²² 中田 1997:27-28.

ordinary public housing apartment block, although enclosed by walls for security reasons. Many of the residents are victims of domestic violence, so a guard is present 24 hours a day. Each facility had a public day care centre on the same grounds, where the residents' children can attend, along with other children of working parents. Each family is allocated a small apartment with one or two rooms and a kitchen. On the ground floor of the building were offices, a room for after school care for older children and communal laundry and bathing facilities. The offices were staffed by social workers, who give the residents any advice necessary on child care, on claiming welfare benefits or finding work. They offer other types of support, such as medical care and extended childcare support. The residents must never leave their children unattended in the facility.

Income

In general, single mother families tend to be concentrated in the lowest income bracket, with many families living below the poverty line. Single mother families in Japan had an average annual income of ¥2.29 million for the financial year of 1997,²³ compared with ¥6.954 million for all non-agricultural households in 1999²⁴, equivalent to 32.9%, suggesting the difficulties that single mother families face. The annual incomes of the unmarried single mothers interviewed for this survey covered a wide range, with an average of ¥2,911,590 for 1999, greater than the average for all single mothers mentioned above, but 41.9% of the average for all non-agricultural households.

These figures include income from Child Benefit (*jidou fuyou teate* 児童扶養手当) and other benefits. In 1993, 71.9% of female-headed households were

²³ 厚生労働省 2001:11.

²⁴ 社会生活統計指標 2001:198.

²⁵ 中田 1997:24-25.

claiming this benefit,²⁵ compared with 70.6% (twelve) of the interviewees in this survey. It is paid on an incremental scale relating to the monthly income of the mother and the number of children. The rate in 1999 was ¥42,370 per calendar month. It is available to children whose parents are divorced, or whose father has deserted or become disabled, and can last till the end of March of the year the child becomes 18. The following benefits are also available are available to single mothers: childrearing allowance (*jidou ikusei teate* 児童育成手当), subsidised medical care, exemption from pension payments, and loans for necessary purchases (*boshi fukushikin* 母子福資金). Miscellaneous benefits, such as discounts on public transport or reduction on water rates are available in some parts of the country. Widows can receive a pension (*izoku nenkin* 遺族年金).

Single mothers without work or other means of support are entitled to receive income support benefits (*seikatsu hogo*, 生活保護). Four of the interviewees in the present survey were claiming this benefit (23.5%). Compared to all households, single mother households are 7.5-times more likely to be drawing this benefit: 103‰ of single mother households compared with 13.7‰ of all households. In a Nagoya city survey, 61.1% of the respondents gave illness as the reason for claiming, and another 12.7% said that they couldn't work because of childcare responsibilities. Despite the existence of these systems and the poverty experienced by single mothers, the ideology of self-reliance, particularly support from one's own family and the community, remains ingrained: some of the women interviewed for this survey were resistant to using benefits to which they were entitled. Applicants for welfare benefits are asked for intimate details of their private lives and relationships, and refusal to give the information may affect eligibility for welfare benefits. Some interviewees felt unable to use welfare services because of the prejudices and unhelpful attitudes expressed by the staff: one interviewee was told by the staff of the Welfare Office that she should

be supported by her family and siblings rather than relying on public services. Another interviewee recounted an experience where staff explicitly told her she could not expect the same treatment as other single mothers and called her a *mekakesan*, a derogatory historical term meaning 'concubine' or 'mistress'. The Welfare office workers are often not well informed about changes in benefit availability research has shown that more than half of those entitled to benefits were not able to receive them²⁶ because of the ignorance or attitude of individual workers in the Welfare Office.²⁷

Employment

In order to elucidate how single mothers earn the income mentioned above, it is necessary to consider their patterns of employment. As shown in the table below, 84.9% of Japanese single mothers are employed, compared with 76.5% of the interviewees in this survey. The interviewees had various types of employment: some were professionals with stable incomes, while others were in more unstable, low-skilled work. There were two nurses (one part-time), two office workers (one part-time), one teacher (part-time), an artist, an English tutor (part-time), a translator, a hospital case worker, a tour guide, a bar owner and a woman who was a professional lobbyist and writer. The rate of unemployment among the interviewees was higher than the average for all single mothers in Japan. Four interviewees living at the Mother and Child Welfare Facilities were unemployed; their children were very young and in some cases in poor health, preventing the mother from working. They were all looking for work, or planned to do so in the near future. Two interviewees living at the facilities were employed, one as a cook and one as a part-time office worker.

²⁶ 色川 1997:45.

²⁷ しんぐるまざあず・ふおらむ・News 2000.1.16 : 13-16.

Table 3: Single mothers' employment pattern in Japan (percentages)²⁸

	Employed	Type of employment				Non-employed
		Business owner	Full-time employee	Part-time	Other [※]	
National survey						
Percentage	84.9	5.7	50.7	38.3	5.3	13.6
This survey						
Percentage	76.5	7.7	61.5	30.8	0	23.5
Number	13	1	8	4	0	4

※ "Other" includes those employed in a family business.

TYPOLOGIES

Interviews carried out for this survey reveal a very complex picture of the life circumstances of unmarried single mothers. Of course, all appeared as unique individuals during the interviews, but it was necessary to sort the information obtained into a manageable and meaningful format. Since the objective of the study was to gain insight into the individual's motivations and life circumstances, I hesitated to place the interviewees into categories. However, dividing the interviewees into typologies based on the main source of support they utilised serves as an important heuristic device for clarification of the individual's subjectivity and agency. The individuals interviewed are hereafter referred to by pseudonyms to disguise their identities.

A significant amount of work, both paid and unpaid, is necessary to ensure the well being of a family, and up to 95% of lone parents today are said to rely on informal support from their families, friends and neighbours.²⁹ Individual interviewees had various sources of support for the tasks of caring and providing for their children. The support could be financial, work-related, childcare, information and housing, as well as psychological support. There was overlap in

²⁸ 厚生労働省 2001:8.

²⁹ Kanata and Banks 1997:69.

the use of different forms of support and variations over time, for example when a previous source of support became unavailable or unnecessary.

The single mother must provide for the family financially as well as ensure that the children are cared for. In a society where the work of the family is usually divided between two people, a legally married heterosexual couple, single mothers may experience significant difficulties. The genetic fathers of the interviewees' children were not generally part of the support system. Only one interviewee, Junko, received ongoing significant support from the father of her children: she and her partner had agreed before having children that they would be jointly responsible for raising their children. Two other interviewees received regular child support payments, which they were saving up for their children.

Broadly speaking, three main sources of support for the interviewees were identifiable:

1. Support from a network of feminist friends. The support mentioned was with childcare and employment, but psychological support and a sense of comradeship with like-minded individuals was very important for the interviewees. For some of the women, as their children grew older, they were able to take on the role of providing support for other single mothers, through counselling activities and political activism in issues concerning single mothers, such as welfare provision. This group is referred to as "feminist" for brevity;
2. Support from the interviewee's natal family (parents, siblings or the wider kin network of aunts, uncles etc). The support obtained was primarily with childcare, accommodation and finances. This group is subsequently referred to as "family";
3. Support from social welfare services. This consisted of accommodation in a welfare facility, financial support, counselling, assistance in finding employment

and childcare support. This group is subsequently referred to as “welfare”. It should be noted that income from welfare benefits is important for many of the women in this study, even those not living in welfare facilities. Five interviewees were receiving welfare benefits at the time of interview, and three others had received welfare payments in the past.

1. Support from a Network of Feminist Friends:

The interviewees included in this group all had doubts about the contemporary marriage and family system. Three of the women, Gin, Hiromi and Junko, had participated in the modern feminist movement since its early days in the 1970s, and since that time, their main source of support was from like-minded feminist friends. They had developed an interest in gender equality, and in particular had doubts about various aspects of the marriage system. In their teens and early twenties, they had participated in various consciousness-raising events and political activities. They tended to have accessible support networks before becoming pregnant, or else they were in a position to activate contacts and possible sources of support when it became necessary. They later became actively involved in single mother support groups or counselling. Sumiko is included in this group, although she can be considered a social radical rather than a declared feminist, in that she expressed doubts about other aspects of the social system, such as education and employment, above gender issues. Hiromi, Junko and Sumiko had little or no contact with their respective birth families.

Their average age at the time of interview was 41.8 years, with ages ranging from 34 to 47 years. Three interviewees had one child, and one had two children, giving a group average of 1.25 children. Their average age for first childbirth was 26.75 years, similar to the average of 26.6 years for women of the cohort born in 1959.³⁰ Their children’s ages at the time of interview ranged from 6 to 21 years

old, with an average of 15.4 years. This group had an average annual income of ¥2,503,500, slightly more than the average for all single mothers. The birth of a child was a stimulus for the women in this group to improve their working situation. Before the birth of their children, their feminist or social activities were prioritised, and employment was seen rather as a means to support a basic level of existence. The birth of a child was a catalyst to attempting to earn a decent wage to support the family. Junko managed to turn skills gained during her feminist activities into a job as a lobbyist, although this is not well-paid work. At the time of interview she was running a cafe co-operatively with a friend, but it was about to close. Junko did not have as much incentive as the other women to improve her financial situation because of the support she received from the father of her children. Junko and her ex-partner had a co-operative child rearing agreement, so she only had to pay for the children's needs when they are with her. Her ex-partner was paying the costs of the children's education.

Sumiko, a woodblock artist, had a very unstable and variable income, varying from zero to ¥1,000,000 a month. She did not calculate her income scrupulously, but estimated it to be ¥1,500,000 per year. She charged a minimum of ¥50,000 for one piece of design work, up to about ¥200,000 per piece of work. However, in the first half of 1999, she had almost no income except for sales of a few small items, such as postcards and calendars and so lived on her savings during that period. Sumiko was working as an artist before her pregnancy, but did not aggressively seek work. After the birth of her child, it became necessary for her to seek work more actively. She said she usually finds work through personal contacts, often people who are sympathetic to her position as a single mother.

Gin was working as a waitress when she became pregnant. She had a series of

³⁰ 井上・江原 1999:3.

low-skilled jobs after the birth of her child before finding employment in an ear nose and throat clinic, where she worked part-time while attending nursing school. She later attended nursing school full-time to gain further qualifications and become a registered nurse. She reported that her income varied according to how many night shifts she works, but she was left with a minimum of ¥310,000 per month after deductions, a relatively high income for a single mother.

After being fired from the lawyer's office where she worked because of her exnuptial pregnancy, Hiromi did office work, then editorial work and marking examination scripts. Following this, she studied for a teacher's license in sociology and then Japanese language. She worked full-time as a teacher for three years, and then decided to work part-time to reduce her stress and at the time of interview was paid ¥2750 per hour, an income of around ¥214,500 per month.

There were no owner-occupiers in this group: the interviewees lived in either public housing or rented accommodation. Public housing is an attractive option, because it is relatively inexpensive, but the supply is insufficient. The available housing units are usually distributed monthly according to the results of a lottery, which anyone may apply to enter. Gin repeatedly attempted to rent a city apartment by entering the housing lottery, but there are no houses available in the area of Kyoto where she works. In some locations, single mothers are given priority in the lotteries, but Gin was never given preferential treatment because of her situation as a single parent; in fact, when she went to apply, she was told that as an unmarried mother she did not have preference. Hiromi was lucky enough to win the right to live in an Osaka City apartment the first time she entered the lottery. It cost only ¥13,400 per month for the 2-room apartment where she had lived for fifteen years. Junko needed only two attempts at the lottery to obtain

the city apartment where she lived at the time of interview. It had 2 rooms and a kitchen, but no bathing facilities at all, and so it cost only ¥5,000 per month, substantially lower than the cost for the equivalent private rental accommodation. She had lived there for seventeen years.

Gin would like to move house, but at the time of interview had been unable to find anywhere comfortable and cheap. She and her teenage son lived in two rooms, with a kitchen and bathroom attached, costing ¥40,000 per month. Problems arose when she needed to study for her feminist counselling work after her son wished to go to sleep, and she was unable to keep a light switched on. Because of this, she rented another room from a friend of hers. in a student dormitory in the neighbourhood of her apartment. She went there each evening at about 9pm to study and sleep. It cost ¥20,000 per month.

Sumiko lived in an old rented apartment with two small rooms, a kitchen and bathroom, costing ¥46,000 per month. Before she moved there, she lived in a very small one-room apartment of with no bath, until the child was 5 months, which was completely unsuitable. After the birth, she thought about entering a Mother and Child Welfare Facility, but she rejected the idea after visiting it because the place seemed very strict and she perceived an air of surveillance, which gave her an unpleasant feeling. She applied for city housing by lottery, but was unsuccessful.

2. Support from the Unmarried Single Mother's Natal Family:

The women in this group received support primarily from their parents, siblings or the wider kinship network. Women such as the interviewees in this group who had demanding jobs with overtime and evening work, or go on business trips tend to need more childcare support than that offered by the public nursery system.

Thus, living with family members who can provide childcare assistance is beneficial for them. Several lived with parents, while others remained living separately but gained other forms of practical support, such as child-care or financial support from family members: Ea Ryon was already living with her mother at the time of her pregnancy and thereby had access to child-care and other practical support; Miki returned to her parents' home when she became pregnant; circumstances led Kaori to buy a house together with her parents; Kyuu received financial assistance from her father in order to purchase an apartment; Aiko and Ryang Sun both received assistance with childcare from their respective mothers; Lika was able to utilise a house belonging to her sister after giving birth, although later she decided to live with her father because of his increasing frailty due to old age. These families are living in an arrangement which perhaps can be considered the traditional way of living for Japanese families. It is still common, especially in the Japanese countryside, for two or three adult generations to live together, although the numbers have steadily declined post-war. In 1995, 12.5% of households nationally consisted of three generations living together³¹, although these families may not be functioning as an integrated unit.

This group ranged in age from 29 to 53 years, with an average age of 42.3 years. They gave birth at the slightly older average age of 33.57 years, compared with the average age for all Japanese woman of 26.6 years, reflecting that higher proportion of these women were pursuing careers before they had children. They had an average annual income of ¥3,633,996 or 52.3% of the average for all households in 1999. This figure excludes Ea Ryon who had an uncharacteristically low income at the point of interview, as she was preparing to

³¹ 井上・江原 1999:9.

open a bar and restaurant; she had previously had an income of ¥500,000 to ¥600,000 per month. The interviewees in this group each had one child, and their children ranged in age from four to fourteen years, with an average age of 8.71 years. The interviewees generally had a high level of education, with three university graduates, one interviewee had completed a Master's course, and one had completed junior college and then nursing school, although two interviewees had only completed high school.

The interviewees in this group mostly had well-paid jobs before they became pregnant and, on finding that they were pregnant or on deciding to become pregnant, they were confident that they could manage financially. They generally continued the same job before and after the pregnancy, and were able to take a certain amount of maternity leave. Aiko continued as a caseworker after a short maternity leave, although her salary was reduced because she was unable to do overtime work. Kaori continued as a tour guide, with the childcare support of her parents. Lika had been managing a student dormitory for about ten years when she became pregnant. Ea Ryon had been a bar owner in Gion, the entertainment district of Kyoto, for about 15 years before her child was born, and was able to continue this work with the support of her mother who took care of the child when Ea Ryon was out at work in the evening. Ryang Sun worked as a translator and desktop publisher for several years before she became pregnant and was able to draw on her mother's support for childcare after the birth of her child.

One exception to this pattern in the “family” group is Miki, who was still at junior college when she got pregnant. As with the interviewees in the previous group, the birth of her child was a stimulus to improve her situation. About a year after her child's birth, she became a dentist's assistant and worked part-time, while going to nursing school part-time. At the time of interview, she was taking

further qualifications for nursing and expressed a strong desire to do postgraduate study and further her career. Kyuu had the lowest income in this group at ¥100,000 per month. She had been teaching English part-time for ten years at the time of interview, having worked for a temping agency both before and after her pregnancy. She had a better income when she worked for the temping agency, but she had child-care problems when her child was on holiday from school. Kyuu had financial support from her family, but not childcare support. For most single mothers, it is the child's grandmother who provides most of the practical support, but Kyuu's mother was already deceased at the time Kyuu's child was born.

All the home owners interviewed belong to this group: five of the seven women in this group were home owners, or 29.4% of the interviewees, greater than the national average of 17.3% home ownership for separated and divorced single mothers.³² Ea Ryon sold her bar in Gion and was able to buy a 2-storey detached house in the suburbs for ¥59,000,000, which she paid for in full at the time of purchase. Kaori was living in a spacious, detached house with her parents and her daughter at the time of interview. Her apartment and her parents' house were destroyed during the Kobe earthquake in 1995, so they decided to buy a house together; she pays the mortgage and the utilities, while her parents pay the day-to-day living expenses. When Lika was pregnant, she moved from a small, unsuitable apartment into a small house owned by her sister. When her child was four years old, she bought a house near to her workplace costing ¥29,000,000, which she was able to repay within five years. She inherited her father's house, and began to rent out the house she bought. Kyuu owns an apartment with three rooms, plus separate kitchen, bathroom and toilet. Her father bought it in her

³² 厚生労働省 2001:16.

name for ¥24,000,000 to allow her to work from home holding English classes, and she repaid him in instalments of ¥1,000,000. Ryang Sun bought a three-room apartment, with kitchen and bathroom for over ¥20,000,000, 11 years ago. Her loan repayments were ¥160,000 per month including management and parking. Miki lives with her father and sister, and they each pay one-third of the household expenses.

Aiko was the only interviewee in this group to live in a rented accommodation: an apartment with 2 rooms, a kitchen and bathroom, costing ¥60,000 per month. However, private housing is not only expensive but there is discrimination. Aiko was evicted at the time of her pregnancy from the apartment she had been living in for seven years, because the landlord said her pregnancy would be a 'nuisance' for the neighbours. She tried to find accommodation through various estate agencies, but was repeatedly refused assistance because of her exnuptial pregnancy. The welfare office judged that her living and financial circumstances were not sufficiently difficult to allow her to enter a welfare facility, and she did not have the time to apply for public housing, because of the unpredictability of the lottery system.

Kaori and Miki became involved in the citizens' group, *Konsakai*, a group dealing principally with the legal and social problems surrounding exnuptial birth, began after the birth of their children, when they became conscious of discrimination against exnuptial children. *Konsakai* was socially and psychologically important for both of them, but also facilitated the legal processes related to child support in which they have each been involved. This involvement could suggest that they be included in the previous group. However, since they lived with their respective natal families at the time of interview, I have included them in this group. Likewise, Aiko, Ea Ryon, and Kyuu all receive support from

friends and colleagues, but their family of origin has been their primary source of support when raising their children.

Despite evidence from their statements during the interviews that they were supported by their respective families, Kaori, Lika, Miki and Ryang Sun each said that they felt unsupported. In Kaori's case, this feeling had perhaps more to do with the difficult working conditions and the inequality she experienced in her job as a tour guide, since her parents were extremely active in caring for Kaori's child. Miki felt that her father and sister had become dependent on her since her mother's death, which occurred when Miki's child was 4 years old, before which they had been dependent on her mother. Ryang Sun's mother died when her child was nine years old, so she no longer had her mother's emotional support and assistance with childcare. The feelings of being without support perhaps are a reflection of the fact that however helpful people around try to be, it is the single mother who ultimately bears sole responsibility for the well being of her child or children, and the feeling of responsibility often weighs heavily.

3. Support from Social Welfare Services:

The interviewees in this group had virtually no support apart from public services. They were residing in Mother and Child Welfare Facilities at the time of interview and were unable to live independently without welfare support for various reasons. They tended to have little or no contact with their family of origin, or had family who were unable to give practical support, for example because of illness or geographical distance. In one case, the interviewee, Pinko, was fleeing from domestic violence and could not communicate her whereabouts to her otherwise supportive family. Beniko, Fumi and Nana had no contact with their families of origin, in the cases of Beniko and Fumi, contact was broken by the parents on learning of the exnuptial pregnancy. Chinatsu, Oriko and Pinko all

had contact with their families of origin, but they were unable to receive practical support from them. Nana received emotional support from her two elder children, and they also helped her with the care of her baby.

These women had not developed strong networks that they could rely on when they became pregnant, and so they relied on the social workers at the facility, or on various social services for advice and information. For example, interviewees in this group tended to receive advice or job introductions from social workers or utilise Hello Work, a public service which introduces job seekers to employment vacancies, whereas interviewees in the “feminist” group received this type of support from friends. Interviewees in the Welfare Facilities did not seem to prioritise making relationships within the facility, and tended to avoid contact with other residents, because they were generally looking ahead to the time when they would be able to leave the facility.

The facilities assist with respite childcare, so that the mothers can have some time to relax away from their children, or can assist the mothers by collecting the children from day care and looking after them until the mother returns from work. While this can be beneficial, it can also lead to a kind of dependence, especially for women like Chinatsu and Fumi, who entered the facility immediately after giving birth and so have no experience of child rearing outside the institutional environment. Chinatsu, who had lived in a facility for two years, said she was sometimes afraid when she thought of the time she would have to leave.

Two of the interviewees in this group had been married at an early age, and had subsequently given birth at an early age. They later divorced and went on to have exnuptial children with other partners. Their ages ranged from 26 to 40 years at

the time of interview, with an average of 35.2 years. The average age of the interviewees when they had their first children is low (25.8 years) when childbirth inside marriage is included, but high (31.3 years) if only exnuptial children are considered. Two of the interviewees had three children, two had two children and two had one child each, giving an average of two children. Their children's ages ranged from a few months of age to twenty years, with an average age of 3.11 when only the exnuptial children are considered, and seven years when all children are considered. The interviewees in this group did not have a high level of education: two graduated high school, three did not complete high school, and one graduated middle school then went to beautician school. Their incomes were low, with an average of ¥2,016,840, which is slightly lower than the ¥2.29 million annual income for divorced and separated women in the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry survey in 1997.³³ Four interviewees were living entirely on welfare benefits, and two, Fumi and Pinko, were earning an independent income through employment, as well as receiving some welfare benefits.

For the interviewees in this group, who were already in low-paid casual jobs, the situation became worse when they had their exnuptial children. They did not have any rights to maternity leave. Chinatsu had a work history of part-time jobs, and was working in a pachinko parlour when she became pregnant, but had to give it up because of the physical strain. Nana had a history of casual work, including waitressing, bookkeeping and factory work. At one point after she got divorced, she had to do three different jobs to support her family: dental reception work, selling frozen foods and working as an assistant in a kiosk in a railway station. At the time of her pregnancy with her third, exnuptial child, she

³³ 厚生労働省 2001:11.

was working at a Korean barbecue restaurant. Oriko had a patchy work history of bookkeeping, word processing and insurance work, as well as bar work, affected by her disability. She stopped work at the time of her first pregnancy. Pinko had worked in her family business as a waitress, and then later worked in a supermarket warehouse, before entering the welfare facility to escape her partner's violence. At the time of interview, she was working as a cook in a nursing home, earning ¥810 per hour, a total of ¥147,420 per month. Before the birth of her third child, Beniko was earning a reasonably high income of ¥500,000 per month for evening bar work and day jobs. At the time of her pregnancies she was doing bar work in the evening and factory work during the day. She thought she would be able to continue bar work to support herself and her children, but the third child's poor health made this impossible and precipitated the family's entry into the welfare facility. The 10pm curfew at the facility is particularly problematical for Beniko, because she would like to return to bar work, which would involve late-night work.

Fumi was working part-time in the office of a company selling computers at the time of interview. She was paid ¥1000 per hour, giving her a total of up to ¥120,000 per month. The job had no security, but Fumi was hoping that they would allow her to become a full-time employee with rights. She had been working as a beautician for many years, but gave up the work at the time of her pregnancy. She said that she would like to return to this type of work, but is unable to do so because it would require working on Sundays, which is impossible because she would have no childcare support.

All the women in the welfare facilities had previously been living in private rented accommodation, except for Chinatsu: she had been effectively homeless, moving between friends' houses and lodgings. It is difficult for single mothers to

leave welfare facilities because of the high cost of housing. Beniko, who has three small children told me that she had been searching for housing, but that even a single room costs ¥50,000 in Kyoto, and a family of four needs more than one room. Rent assistance payable to a welfare claimant has an upper limit of ¥50,000, so although she did not like life in the facility, she will remain there for the foreseeable future.

SECTION VI: CONCLUSION

The category “unmarried single mothers” should not presume similarities between interviewees, but should merely offer a starting point for exploration of the different practical strategies of the women concerned. The interviewees appear to differ from the “average” single mother described in other surveys, who is usually divorced. They had fewer children than average, and are on average better educated and earn more money. However, information obtained in the interviews suggests that there is no typical profile for an unmarried single mother in Japan, since there is a bipolar spread of income, education, home ownership and other resources. Thus, the interviewees have been divided into typologies based on the types of support they are able to receive. Three main types of support have been identified here for the unmarried single mothers who were interviewed. For each type of support, a typical profile could be expressed as follows:

1. "Feminist" group:

The interviewees in this group tend to have a high level of education, graduating from junior college or university before they became pregnant. They either have well-paid jobs, such as teaching or lower paying jobs which are personally satisfying, including writing, political lobbying, or art. They had low-paid jobs

while younger, but the child's birth was a stimulus to improve their employment status and stability. They were younger than average when they gave birth (26.75 years) and they generally had one child each.

2. "Family" group:

The interviewees in this group had a high overall level of education. Graduation from university was the norm, with some postgraduate study. In most cases, they had well-paid, demanding jobs, (social worker, translator, tour guide, teacher) before the birth of their children, which they were able to continue afterwards. They were older on average when they gave birth (33.57 years, with more than half the group in their late thirties when they gave birth).

3. "Welfare" group:

The interviewees in this group had a lower level of education than the above groups, being either middle or high school graduates. They tend to have a work history of low-paid, low-skilled, part-time work, such as working as a checkout operator or pachinko parlour assistant, meaning that they did not have job security when they become pregnant. They were younger as a group than the other two groups. They are more likely to have been married when they were young or lived with men, including the children's fathers, and have children from those marriages. They had their marital children at a relatively young age (25.8 years on average). They were living in welfare facilities at the time of interview, having lived in rented accommodation before giving birth.

The above typologies show the non-uniformity of types of people who become unmarried single mothers, and their ability to cope with bringing up their families. There are clearly a variety of considerations for social policy: extended child care for those who have jobs with long hours; training and further education

opportunities for those who require them; welfare support to tide the single mother over the most difficult period after the birth of her child.

At the time of interview, most of the interviewees had overcome their difficulties; the “welfare” group interviewees were in the most difficult position. While all the interviewees in this survey had support, either public or private, when no support is available to the single mother and her family, the consequences can be tragic. In February 2000, the Daily Yomiuri reported the death through starvation of the 2-year-old-child an unmarried mother in Utsunomiya.³⁴ The family was eligible for welfare benefits, but the mother did not understand the system well enough to make a successful claim. She had applied for welfare benefit, but the application had not been processed because the mother had not supplied details of her bank account. She had been attempting to support the family by addressing envelopes, but was not earning enough to live on. At the time of her daughter's death, the gas and water had been disconnected from her apartment because of non-payment of bills; the family had a little rice but the mother was unable to cook it. Relatives had given some support at first, but this had been discontinued for reasons unspecified in the article. The child's father had disappeared when the woman became pregnant. Neighbours (including members of the local residents' association) did not have any contact with the woman, although she used to take her daughter to a communal tap to drink water. She is quoted in the Daily Yomiuri article as saying “My daughter didn't eat anything for a week before she died. I had nothing to eat for two weeks.”

³⁴ Daily Yomiuri 29 February, 2000.

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