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# Marriage, Abortion, or Unwed Motherhood? How Women Evaluate Alternative Solutions to Premarital Pregnancies in Japan and the United States

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## Abstract

In this article, the authors argue that to understand the very low incidence of outside-of-marriage childbearing in contemporary Japan one needs to take into account perceptions of all possible solutions to a premarital pregnancy: marriage, abortion, and childbearing outside wedlock. To demonstrate the particular impact of these perceptions in Japan, the authors compare them with those in the United States, a country where many more children are born outside wedlock. Using mixed methods, the authors demonstrate that for a typical Japanese woman, giving birth outside marriage is the morally inferior solution. For many American women, in contrast, choosing to bear a child outside wedlock rather than rushing into a marriage or having an abortion is often seen as a sign of greater maturity. These preferences play an important role in maintaining the norm of childbearing within marriage in Japan and also contribute to our understanding of how this norm has waned in the United States.

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**Keywords**

marriage, abortion, illegitimacy, family attitudes, unwed motherhood, Japan, the United States

Growing rates of childbearing outside wedlock have been at the heart of family research in industrialized countries in the past few decades. Numerous studies have aimed to uncover why ever more women make the decision to have a child independently of the decision to marry. Large representative surveys (e.g., Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study in the United States, British Household Panel Survey) have enabled researchers to carry out detailed quantitative analysis of the characteristics of people who have children without getting married. Qualitative projects have given voice to unmarried parents, unpacking the reasoning behind their choices (e.g., Edin & Kefalas, 2005; England & Edin, 2007). Most of the existing research, however, is based on Western data. This may seem justifiable given that among the developed countries the incidence of premarital childbearing is much higher in the West. Moreover, unwed mothers and their children came into the spotlight in Western countries only once they constituted a significant proportion of single-parent households. Their grip on public attention is to a large extent due to fear that growing up in alternative families has negative consequences for the children ranging from lower educational attainment and teenage pregnancies to health problems (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Parke, 2003).

In developed Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea, few children are born outside marital unions (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare [MHLW], 2006a; Suzuki, 2003). Partly for this reason, extramarital fertility has not received as much attention. Yet exclusion of non-Western countries from scholarly attention means that little is known about the applicability of theories developed on Western data to different cultural environments. Japan's distinctive family trends have enabled researchers to offer a more nuanced explanation of changes in marriage trends in other parts of the world (Raymo & Iwasawa, 2005). They have also helped researchers investigate the generalizability of the mechanisms proposed to explain divorce trends (Ono, 2009) and cohabitation patterns (Raymo, Iwasawa, & Bumpass, 2009) in industrialized countries. In this article, we will analyze how the strong normative connection between childbearing and marriage in Japan is at least partially rooted in a different preference order associated with possible solutions for a premarital pregnancy. Norm maintenance is important to study because it has serious implications for understanding the causes of and

obstacles to normative change. Thus, comparing the mechanisms that help maintain childbearing within marriage in Japan with the way corresponding mechanisms function in the United States can throw light on why this norm has been so much slower to change in Japan and how contemporary social trends may affect it.

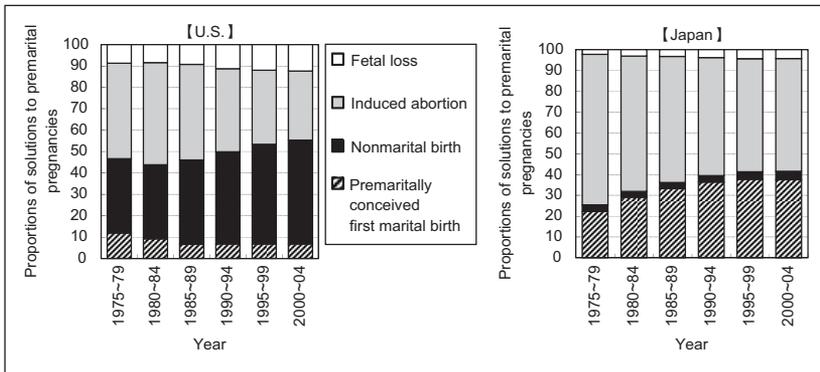
Our main goals are (a) to investigate the meanings Japanese unmarried mothers ascribe to three main ways of resolving premarital pregnancies: marriage, abortion, and having a child outside wedlock; (b) to compare their evaluations with those of unwed mothers in the United States, a Western country with an illegitimacy rate almost 20 times higher than that of Japan; and (c) to speculate about the effects differences in perceptions are likely to have on the decisions of unmarried and pregnant women. To do this, we will present the views of Japanese unwed mothers based on detailed qualitative interviews, compare them with the perceptions of American unmarried mothers as documented by Edin and Kefalas (2005), and validate these qualitative findings against International Survey of Low Fertility Societies that collected data on attitudes to alternative families among the general population in Japan and the United States.

## Background

In both Japan and the United States, a rising share of births is conceived premaritally. Based on vital statistics, we estimate that 45% of all births were conceived premaritally in the United States in the early 1990s, up from 20% in the early 1970s. In Japan, 23% of all births resulted from premarital conceptions in early 2000s, up from 5% in late 1970s.

Premarital pregnancies, though growing in both the United States and Japan, are resolved very differently in the two countries: Abortion and marriage play a much more prominent role in Japan compared with the United States (see Figure 1 for the illustration of the discussion below). Indeed, more than half of all premarital pregnancies to women aged 15 to 29 years were aborted in Japan between 2000 and 2004, 38% of all premarital conceptions to this age group ended up as marital births, whereas only 4% led to nonmarital births. In the United States, a third of all premarital conceptions in the same age group were aborted and almost 50% of premaritally conceived children were born outside wedlock. Considerably less than 10% of premarital conceptions resulted in “shotgun” weddings in the United States (Note 3 to Figure 1).

Typically, differences in the outcomes of premarital conceptions have been explained in terms of difficulties associated with bearing a child outside



**Figure 1.** Proportionate use of various solutions to premarital pregnancies by women aged 15 to 29 years: United States–Japan comparison

Note 1: The proportion of induced abortions experienced by unmarried women in the United States is based on the pregnancy rates by marital status (Ventura, Abma, Mosher, & Henshaw, 2009) for all age groups. For the early 2000s, we estimate that 82% of induced abortions were experienced by unmarried women, up from 60% in the late 1970s. In Japan, the proportions of induced abortions by marital status are estimated using pregnancy history data from Japanese National Fertility Surveys (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research [NIPSSR], 2007). Eighty-nine percent of induced abortions were experienced by unmarried women in the early 2000s, up from 66% in the late 1970s.

Note 2: We assume that the incidence rates of fetal losses to live births are the same for marital and extramarital pregnancies (for Japan: authors' tabulations based on NIPSSR [2007]; for the United States: Ventura et al. [2009] and Ventura, Mosher, Curtin, Abma, and Henshaw [2001]).

Note 3: The data on the number of premaritally conceived marital births are available for the United States only until 1994. For later years we conservatively assume that the proportion of such births remains unchanged.

Source: For the United States: Bachu (1999), Martin et al. (2009), Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, and Park (2002), Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, Park, and Sutton (2002), National Center for Health Statistics (1974a, 1974b, 1977, 1979, 1984, 1989), Ventura et al. (2009), Ventura and Bachrach (2000), Ventura, Martin, Taffel, Mathews, and Clarke (1994), Ventura et al. (2001). For Japan: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (various years-a, various years-b, various years-c).

wedlock. Existing theories suggest that as the obstacles to premarital child-bearing are eroded, the norm prohibiting it also erodes. The erosion of this norm in the United States has been associated with material and cultural changes that took place over the past century. Material changes include women's growing labor market participation (Becker, 1991) as well as the rise of welfare provision (Murray, 1984), which have been argued to enable more women bear and rear children alone. On the level of culture, greater acceptability of diverse family forms (Cherlin, 2004; Ermisch, 2005) has meant that non-traditional family choices are now met with less resistance.

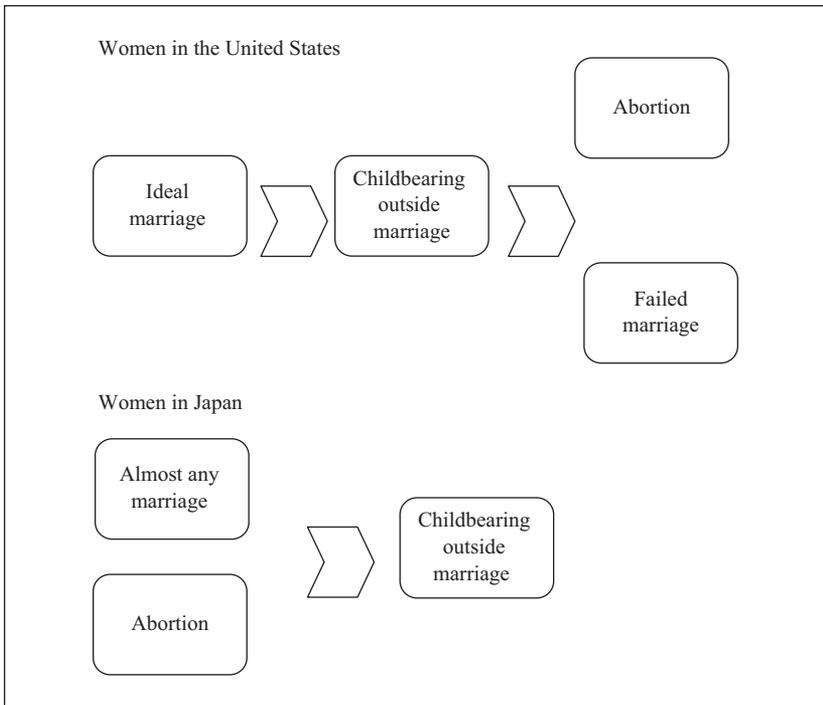
The theories outlined above would seem to suggest that the rarity of unwed mothers in contemporary Japan is a natural consequence of the disadvantages they face. The majority of Japanese people believe that marriage is an essential condition for childbearing. Unwed mothers find securing adequate income for their families difficult and face legal and social discrimination (Hertog, 2009). Although there is little doubt that these disadvantages discourage women from having children alone, a comparison with the labor market, welfare and cultural environment of American unwed mothers outlined in the following suggests that a more nuanced explanation is needed.

Even as childbearing outside wedlock has become more common in the United States, many unwed mothers there live in poverty (Edin & Lein, 1997; Garfinkel & McLanahan, 2003). Although social assistance for single mothers in contemporary Japan is far from generous, the level of provision is in fact higher than that in the United States according to Bradshaw and Finch (2002). Finally, divorced and unwed mothers are treated virtually identically in the labor market and by the welfare system in Japan (Hertog, 2009). The dramatic increase in both divorce rate and the numbers of divorced single mothers over the past few decades (MHLW, 2006b; Raymo, Iwasawa, & Bumpass, 2004) suggests that existing economic disadvantages discourage single motherhood to a lesser extent than they used to.

Legal discrimination of unwed mothers and their children in Japan, which does not have parallels in modern Western countries, is likely to account for some of women's reluctance to bear children outside wedlock. Importantly, however, it has been reduced considerably over the past few decades (Hertog, 2009). The fact that this reduction has not been followed by a spread of childbearing outside wedlock suggests that legal discrimination is an insufficient explanation for the abiding strong association between marriage and childbearing.

Given the lack of Christian-inspired values that view childbearing before marriage as sinful, Japan should be a prime candidate for unconstrained childbearing outside wedlock. Perceptions of out-of-wedlock childbearing (as documented in the International Survey of Low Fertility Societies) indeed seem surprisingly flexible in the context of virtually absent premarital births. The U.S. premarital childbearing rate is 20 times higher than Japan's, yet the proportion of people who would "approve" or "rather approve" of a child born outside wedlock in the United States (54.7%) is only somewhat bigger than in Japan (41.2%). Stigmatization of out-of-wedlock childbearing in Japan turns out to be weaker than the virtual absence of premarital births seems to imply.

In sum, difficulties faced by unwed mothers in Japan fail to account convincingly for the resilience of the normative sequence in which marriage



**Figure 2.** Family formation preferences in the United States and Japan

always precedes childbearing. In the following, we will explore a possible additional explanation. We will argue that the norm of childbearing within marriage is maintained not just through external factors deterring women from having children before getting married but also as women actively choose alternative solutions to premarital conceptions based on preferences rooted in differing family ideals in Japan and the United States. These preferences can roughly be ordered into the following hierarchies (see Figure 2).

As Figure 2 indicates, an American woman would often rather have a child outside wedlock than enter a substandard marriage or terminate a premarital pregnancy. Japanese women in contrast prefer almost any marriage, even with a man far from their ideal, to having a child outside a marital union. The well-documented high incidence of “shotgun” marriages in Japan suggests that many women are able to act on their preferences. When marriage is not possible, most Japanese women choose abortions, which are easily available and much less controversial than in the United States. These preferences

mean that in Japan few unmarried and pregnant women even consider having a child outside marriage. We argue that these individual preferences play an important role in explaining the aggregate differences in premarital child-bearing trends in the United States and Japan.

## Method and Data

This article relies on both quantitative and qualitative data. For the quantitative analysis, we use data from the International Survey of Low Fertility Societies (hereafter ISLFS survey), conducted by the Cabinet Office of the Japanese Government from October to December 2005. This survey was chosen because it has a large number of relevant questions probing attitudes to various scenarios of family formation in Japan and the United States, and it was conducted roughly at the same time as our primary qualitative data collection took place. The survey used nationally representative samples of 20- to 49-year-old men and women (1,000 Americans, 472 men and 528 women; and 1,115 Japanese, 501 men and 614 women). Quota sampling with careful consideration of characteristics such as education and occupation was used in the United States, and stratified random sampling was used in Japan.

Quantitative data are ideally suited to document a broad-brush picture of attitudes to extramarital childbearing in Japan and the United States, but it is difficult to capture people's underlying motivations using them, especially in the case of sensitive choices. Moreover, "the norms of society do not constitute a constituent and coherent whole. On the contrary, they are often vaguely formulated and discrepant" (van Velsen, 1978, p. 146). Thus, as originally argued for by van Velsen and since then commonly accepted by qualitative researchers, the stress should be "on the study of norms in conflict" (van Velsen, 1978, p. 146). Hence, we complement our quantitative analysis with qualitative interviews with Japanese and American unwed mothers to put into a sharp relief the process of decision making of women who find themselves unmarried and pregnant.

One might protest that those who have children outside wedlock think systematically differently about pregnancy resolution options. Yet if they do, they are most likely to do so in a way that sets them *against* marriage or abortion options, hence weakening the hypothesized preference order presented above. If even those who have children outside wedlock would have preferred to have married and believe an abortion might have been better for their children—as we will show is the case in Japan—this should apply a fortiori to other Japanese women. Therefore, our deliberate selection bias

makes our study of the role of preferences in premarital pregnancies resolution in Japan in contrast to the United States only more rigorous.

The primary qualitative data used for this article consist of 68 in-depth semistructured interviews with unwed mothers, collected in Japan between June 2004 and May 2005. The interviews concentrated on the period of pregnancy: what the women were worried about, when and how they made their choice as to how to resolve the pregnancy, whether anyone had a particular effect on their decision, what they perceived as the biggest obstacle to having a child alone, what helped them most to decide to have a child outside marriage, and so on. To ensure diversity, interview subjects were enlisted through several different routes: grassroots groups, welfare institutions, personal contacts, and advertisements in the Internet chat rooms for single mothers. None of the interviewees were paid.

We interviewed women in the urban Kantō and Kansai areas, as well as in Fukuoka and Tottori prefectures. Hence, both rural and urban areas were represented. The age of the interviewees varied from 19 to 73 years. The majority of the interviewees were in their 30s or 40s. The education levels ranged from junior high school (mandatory in Japan) graduates to women with doctorate degrees. Forty-four percent of unwed mothers interviewed were full-time employed, 31% had various non-full-time working arrangements, 6% were self-employed, and 19% were unemployed. The average salary was 2.7 million yen (about \$24,500) a year. For comparison, the national average for unwed mothers was 2.33 million yen (about \$21,200) a year in 2003 (The Japan Institute of Labor and Policy Training, 2003).

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by Hertog and then coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach to allow important themes to emerge inductively.

For qualitative comparison with American unwed mothers, we rely on the results from a detailed qualitative study by Edin and Kefalas (2005). Edin and Kefalas studied low-income women, whereas we interviewed women from all social backgrounds. Direct comparisons therefore are not possible. We are not comparing ethnographic details or holistic accounts of lifestyles and social context but rather a limited set of fundamental decisions and attitudes that both our primary data collection and Edin and Kefalas's study focused on. We therefore believe that a generic comparison is both legitimate and illuminating.

Our combined use of quantitative and qualitative data means that our findings both tell us something about Japanese and American women's preferences generally and allow us to speculate in detail about the mechanisms maintaining these preferences (Small, 2009).

Pregnancy, whether marital or premarital, involves two people. This article concentrates on the women's side of the story. Although the man's cooperation is needed to opt for marriage, if marriage is unavailable women can still choose to abort, give up the child for adoption, or bear and raise a child outside marriage, all important choices not necessarily affected by males.

The quantitative analysis sections of this article offer glimpses of male choices. However, a detailed discussion of men's side of the story merits a separate article. Space constraints mean that as many other articles with qualitative components this one has to concentrate on one gender (Matthews, 2005).

## **The Alternatives: "Shotgun" Marriage, Abortion, and Adoption**

Finding herself unmarried and pregnant, a woman has four alternatives: to get married and have a child, to bear a child outside wedlock and raise it, to bear the child and give it up for adoption, or to have an abortion. We hypothesize that alternatives to bearing a child outside marriage appear much more attractive to Japanese women than to their American counterparts (see Figure 2) and this plays a crucial role in reducing the incidence of premarital child-bearing. Below, we first say a few words about adoption as a solution to an extramarital birth. We then analyze how marriage is evaluated against child-bearing outside wedlock and how abortion is thought of when the only alternative is bearing a child alone.

### *Giving Up the Child Is Rare in Both the United States and Japan*

Japanese people traditionally put a high value on the continuation of the family line, and to this day blood-related children constitute the majority of nonadult adoptees in Japan. Adoptions of unrelated children, from which an unmarried woman who feels unable to support a child could benefit, have in contrast been very rare. Similarly, few children born outside wedlock end up in orphanages in Japan (for more details, see Hertog, 2009).

In the United States, the historically prominent use of adoptions as a solution for premarital pregnancies has waned with the legalization of abortions and introduction of the pill in the 1970s. Today, few premaritally born children are given up for adoptions (Bachrach, Stolley, & London, 1992). In sum, the role of adoptions in the resolution of premarital pregnancies is currently minor in both countries; more revealing differences lie in attitudes to other options.

**Table 1.** Attitudes Toward Marriage and Partnerships: United States–Japan Comparison

Gender	Country	Total (%)	Which Idea About Marriage Do You Agree With the Most?						
			Necessary to Get Married	Better to Get Married	Better to Live With a Partner <sup>a</sup>	Better to Have A Boy/Girlfriend <sup>b</sup>	Not Necessary to Get Married <sup>c</sup>	Other	Do Not Know
Male	United States	100.0	14.6	43.0	12.5	7.2	20.1	0.9	1.7
	Japan	100.0	16.2	56.3	1.6	5.8	17.8	0.4	2.0
Female	United States	100.0	13.5	41.1	9.1	4.7	29.0	1.0	1.7
	Japan	100.0	7.7	52.0	2.3	9.6	26.7	0.0	1.8

a. It is all right not to get married, but it is better to live with a partner.

b. It is all right not to get married or live with a partner, but it is better to have a boyfriend/girlfriend.

c. It is not necessary to get married, live with a partner, or have a boyfriend/girlfriend at all.

Source: International Survey of Low Fertility Societies, 2005.

### *Marriage: A Luxury in the United States, a Necessity in Japan*

One may hypothesize that more Japanese than American women marry once they find themselves pregnant because they expect greater benefits from marriage. In the ISLFS survey, more Japanese than American women agreed that it is necessary or better to get married, offering some support to this line of argument.

Yet the difference is small, as only about 5% more women in Japan than in the United States believe that it is necessary or better to get married (Table 1). Also, the stronger perceived necessity does not translate into higher expectations of marriage in Japan. Fifty percent of Japanese women agree that married people are happier or somewhat happier than unmarried ones, compared with 67.2% of American women. Recommendations to an unmarried couple who are expecting a child (Table 2) capture some of the possible reasons behind the different attitudes to marriage in the two countries.

Responses of Japanese men and women demonstrate that they largely see marriage as a practical arrangement for bearing and rearing children. More than 70% of Japanese people believe that a marriage should take place in case of a pregnancy. In contrast, in the United States, more than 50% of people say that a marriage is unnecessary in these circumstances. Americans more often than not see marriage and childbearing as distinctive choices.

**Table 2.** Attitudes Toward Premarital Pregnancy: United States–Japan Comparison

Gender	Country	Total (%)	What Do You Think an Unmarried Couple Should Do Once Pregnancy Is Confirmed?					
			Should Get Married Before the Child Is Born <sup>a</sup>	Should Get Married When the Child Is Born <sup>b</sup>	No Necessity to Get Married <sup>c</sup>	Should Get an Abortion <sup>d</sup>	Other	Do Not Know
Male	United States	100.0	35.2	6.4	46.8	2.1	3.2	6.4
	Japan	100.0	55.5	17.0	21.8	0.4	1.0	4.4
Female	United States	100.0	30.3	4.2	55.7	1.1	4.2	4.6
	Japan	100.0	60.9	11.2	23.5	0.7	0.5	3.3

- a. They should get married before the child is born.
- b. They should get married when the child is born.
- c. There is no necessity to get married even when the pregnancy is confirmed.
- d. The woman should get an abortion.

Source: International Survey of Low Fertility Societies, 2005.

The reasons for the persistently high instrumental value ascribed to marriages in Japan as opposed to decline in practical importance of marriage in the United States have been documented in existing literature and will not be covered in this article in detail. Broadly speaking, in the early postwar years the value of marriage, particularly as an environment for bearing and rearing children, was significantly increased through legal, welfare, and employment incentives (see, Holloway, 2010). These incentives have weakened recently, but so far this has not destroyed the well-entrenched norm of childbearing within marriage. In the United States, in turn, the benefits of marriage have been declining for much of the time, just as they were increasing or stable in Japan, and marriage has turned from a universally applicable social norm into “a marker of prestige and personal achievement” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 848).

The general patterns of marriage-related attitudes outlined in the ISLFS survey above are confirmed and elaborated by our qualitative data. The majority of Japanese unwed mothers in our sample saw marriage as a default life scenario, something to be expected and accepted without much thought. Haruko, a 39-year-old mother of a 6-year-old boy, who was married and

divorced before she had her son outside wedlock, explained that she never questioned the necessity of marriage. When it came to her own marriage, rather than thinking about happiness and romance, she “just had no reason not to marry.” This attitude was shared by virtually all our Japanese interviewees irrespective of their social status, background, and views. The belief that marriage is a default life choice was encouraged by women’s significant others. Naomi’s parents, for example, were really glad when, at 32, she told them she was pregnant, concluding that she will finally take the next appropriate step in life and “marry the boyfriend she has been dating for so long.” The parents, as well as Naomi herself, strongly believed that marriage is an inevitable precursor to childbearing.

More than half of the Japanese unmarried mothers in our sample had children from married men. Thirty-two out of 68 unwed mothers personally had negative marriage-related experiences. Eight women have seen the relationship between their parents break down and were raised by single parents. Five unwed mothers were married themselves and went through painful divorces. Nineteen women were raised by parents whose relationship was far from ideal. Paradoxically, this firsthand experience of difficult or even failing marriages did not seem to make marriage less desirable. Some women even combined a very skeptical view of marriage and a perception that it is both proper and essential and wished to get married themselves. Tomoko, a 39-year-old mother of an infant girl, had a doctorate degree in law, used to work as a university lecturer, and at the time of the interview was successfully managing her own small investment company. She said she never had any particular piety for marriage:

On the contrary, when I was younger I was actively involved in the movement against the marriage system. Also, because I was an academic I kept postponing marriage. I did not really want to get married, but I thought when I get older I will marry. I thought it will be sad to be old if you have not married. I also thought that with age I will start feeling a desire to marry.

Talking about her parents’ marriage, Tomoko added: “They do not get along very well. It was an arranged marriage, but still they did not have a divorce and even now they are *properly* together.” So in spite of professing liberal family views, Tomoko still saw marriage as a default life-stage, something one may choose to defer (as long as there are no children) but not opt out of altogether. Similarly, Madoka, a 27-year-old woman 8 months into her pregnancy and with no prospect of a marriage, mused:

Well, I do not really know a single couple whose married life is going smoothly. So I do not really see what specific merits marriage has. Still, it is better to raise a child together rather than alone I think.

These implicit endorsements of even unhappy marriages as a “proper” and “better” way of life stand in stark contrast with the moral hierarchies American unwed mothers have forged in the past years. For many poor American women, interviewed by Edin and Kefalas, only a stable happy marriage was a worthwhile undertaking. A marriage followed by a divorce was seen by many as inferior to a never-married status. As Marilyn, a 24-year-old unmarried mother with two children, explained, “I don’t wanna have a big trail of divorce you know. I’d rather say, ‘Yes I had my kids out of wedlock’ than say ‘I married *this* idiot.’ It’s like a pride thing” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, pp. 116, 120).

American unwed mothers thought about marriage seriously and at length, and as more of a personal and romantic choice. It was not “a matter of timing” as is common in Japan according to Junko, a 42-year-old Japanese unwed mother of a 7-year-old girl. Recalling her failed marriage, Junko explained, “By chance I got married at 27, it happened very rapidly, I did not think about it much.” Low-income American women tried to leave little to chance as “most poor young women believe strongly that a couple should wait for five or more years for marriage” so they really have a chance to get to know each other: “Nearly everyone has a morality tale to tell of two fools who rushed into marriage only to divorce” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 123). When American unwed mothers felt that their man has important shortcomings, these were to be worked on before marriage could be considered: “Women often stick with their partners for years, hoping for a transformation, waiting to marry until the change comes” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 122).

Few unwed Japanese mothers, including those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, were as concerned with all the things that might go wrong in a marriage as the American women interviewed by Edin and Kefalas (2005) were. Forty-year-old Mieko, who had a well-paid job as a systems engineer at a large company, is an example of how many shortcomings Japanese women were willing to overlook once they found themselves pregnant. The father of Mieko’s 3-year-old daughter did not have a stable job, and Mieko suspected that he periodically got involved in borderline criminal activities. Unsuccessful attempts to start a business left him hugely indebted. He borrowed a substantial proportion of Mieko’s savings and proved unable to return the money, so when she needed to buy a bigger flat after her daughter’s birth she had to take out a mortgage. Finally, she discovered that he was

married (though separated from his wife) and had had another affair while he was dating her. In spite of all that Mieko maintained that if he could at least clear his debts, which she could not afford to repay because she was now responsible for a child, she would marry him (in Japan the spouses' debt responsibilities are shared).

### *Expected Childbearing Dramatically Increases Pressure to Marry for Japanese Women*

With pregnancy, for most Japanese women marriage turned from a default step to be taken at some point in life into a matter of immediate urgency. For 33 out of 68 never-married mothers in our sample, marriage was theoretically possible because the father of their child was not already married to someone else. Of these women, the majority recalled that once they realized they were pregnant, their first thought was of marriage. Naomi, a 45-year-old woman with a 12-year-old daughter, was typical in that respect. She had serious misgivings about her relationship with the child's father before she discovered her pregnancy. The pregnancy, however, made her forget her doubts, and Naomi thought she "should start preparing for the wedding."

Even women who had ambiguous or negative views of marriage prior to their pregnancy, saw it as a solution unconditionally superior to other options. Keiko, a 36-year-old mother of a 7-year-old girl, grew up in a dysfunctional family:

My parents did not have a very good relationship. My father always said whatever he wanted and I was always sorry for my mom. I think it would have been better if they had a divorce. I would have rather lived with my mother alone. . . . I never thought I was happy even though I had both parents. My own family was an unhappy one so I never thought of marriage as a particularly good thing.

However, when she herself got pregnant, marriage suddenly seemed much more attractive: "I used to think it does not matter whether I marry or not. However when I got pregnant I started worrying (whether it may not be better for the child if I got married)."

Several Japanese women in our sample who reported liberal attitudes to marriage before pregnancy also changed their views once they were expecting to have children. Chieko, a 56-year-old unwed mother of an 11-year-old boy, for example, lived for 6 years in a civil partnership in her 30s, and felt no desire for marriage. On the contrary,

We both thought the family registry (*koseki*) is a cause of many social ills in Japan so we planned never to marry. Well, eventually we separated and at the time there were no children. Having had this experience I was sure I am a person who does not feel strongly about marriage and does not care much about her family register, but when I faced the reality of expecting a child [marriage became paramount].

This reversal of views was partially the result of increased external pressure. Most women's significant others believed that having a child outside wedlock is a tough and unenviable choice for both the mother and her future child. When Yuri, a 38-year-old with a 5-year-old daughter, discussed with her friends her decision to have a child outside marriage, they understood her choice, but they "felt that in contemporary Japan, given the realities and the social norms, [having a child without marrying] is very difficult." At least as important as pressure from significant others was women's firm belief that their future child needs not only a mother but also a father. Once they decided to keep their pregnancy most women thought like Masako, a 45-year-old unmarried mother of a 7-year-old girl, who maintained that "having a father in the family is just natural." The question of what kind of father the man they got pregnant from will become did not seem to matter very much at least while the marriage was an alternative to having a child outside wedlock. In our sample of Japanese unwed mothers only six women rejected an offer of a marriage: Three of them were staunch supporters of feminism and decided to forego marriage for ideological reasons. The other three women found the prospective partnership so unsuitable that they could not bring themselves to commit to it. For our remaining 62 interviewees marriage was simply not on offer: In about half of the cases, the men were already married, in the rest of cases they were single but refused to cooperate.

The rarity of women who rejected marriage among Japanese unwed mothers suggests that when marriage was possible it usually happened. Raymo and Iwasawa's (2008) finding that "bridal pregnancy is associated with a significantly higher likelihood of non-normative educational pairing [marriages where the husband has a lower education level than the wife] and that this relationship has become more pronounced over time" (p. 847) similarly demonstrates that Japanese women across the education spectrum are willing to accept less desirable marriage partners to avoid childbearing outside marriage. The fact that in Japan in 90% of cases when a premarital pregnancy is carried to term the child is born within marriage—compared with a bit more than 10% of premarital pregnancies that are carried to term in the United States—suggests

that Japanese men are also under heavy pressure to acquiesce to “shotgun” weddings. The greater likelihood of marriages preceded by pregnancy to end in divorce (Iwasawa & Mita, 2008) may be a consequence of this willingness by both sides to (initially) compromise.

### *American Women Often See Marriage and Childbearing as Two Separate Issues*

In contrast, in the United States marriage and child rearing were essentially two separate issues as demonstrated in Table 2. For American mothers, pregnancy was an opportunity to carefully evaluate their current relationship against their ideal of what a good relationship should be. In many cases they were not sure that their relationship was good enough and chose to wait and see how it develops rather than rush into a marriage. Those who married purely because of a pregnancy were often condemned because such marriages “are almost certain to end in divorce, and thus benefit neither the couple nor the child” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 123). Many American unmarried low-income mothers were actually proud of not getting married immediately as this was seen as a sign of greater responsibility:

Twenty-four-year-old Linda, a Puerto Rican mother of a four-year-old daughter and a son who is almost two, proudly says she is one of those people who take marriage seriously rather than treating it as ‘just a piece of paper.’ ‘Look at me. I been with my boyfriend for *six years* and we have *two kids* and *I’m* not ready yet for marriage!’ (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, pp. 121-122)

Such cautious attitudes led many of Edin and Kefalas’s (2005) interviewees to reject or postpone marriage even when it was offered. As discussed above, this hardly ever happened in Japan.

In sum, while Edin and Kefalas (2005) concluded that for poor U.S. unwed mothers “marriage is a longed for luxury” and “children are a necessity” (p. 172), for Japanese unwed mothers, irrespective of their background, marriage is an essential precondition for childbearing. Japanese women’s willingness to accept less than ideal partners once they were pregnant with a child they wanted to keep meant that few of them rejected marriages the way American women did. Consequently, many more women in Japan than in the United States end up in “shotgun” marriages rather than having children outside wedlock.

Marriage, however, involves two individuals, and as many of our Japanese interviewees discovered, sometimes a marital union is unobtainable because the other party is already married to somebody else or is unwilling to comply. The next section of the article investigates women's priorities in such situations.

### *Difference in Abortion-Related Pressures*

In the United States about a third of premarital conceptions are aborted, whereas in Japan this happens to more than a half of such conceptions. This difference may be even bigger, for some researchers (Frühstück, 2003; Matsuyama, 1988) argue that Japanese abortion figures are significantly underreported; they estimate the real number of abortions to be between one and a half and four times higher than the official one.

Given the huge difference in abortion use in the two countries, it is important to investigate the potential factors leading women to accept or reject abortions. It is difficult to say whether the legal treatment of, and public funding available for, abortions enable more premaritally pregnant women to choose abortions in the United States or in Japan. American federal law and Japanese law allow abortions until the fetus is deemed viable (around the 22nd week). The majority of abortions of choice (those where the pregnancy is not a result of rape or incest and abortion is not a medical necessity) must be paid for individually in both countries (for details on abortions in the United States, see Jones, Finer, and Singh [2010]; in Japan, see Norgren [2001]).

The evidence on material factors enabling women to have abortions is inconclusive but seems to suggest that both in Japan and in the United States an unmarried and pregnant woman wishing to have an abortion would be able to do so until late into her pregnancy as long as she manages to secure the money necessary. In the following section, we will argue that the popularity of abortions also depends on attitudes to both abortion and its alternatives. When marriage is unavailable a pregnant woman has no choice but to have a child outside marriage or an induced abortion. The ISLFS survey does not have a question about the best reaction to a premarital pregnancy when marriage is not an option. It is possible, however, to speculate about the potential differences in the treatment of premarital pregnancies between the two countries based on preferred solutions to unwanted pregnancies in general.

American attitudes to abortion are polarized (see Table 3). According to the ISLFS survey almost 30% of all respondents believe that nothing can

**Table 3.** Attitudes to Abortion as a Solution for an Unwanted Pregnancy: United States.–Japan Comparison

		If a Woman Has an Unwanted Pregnancy, What Do You Think She Should Do?						
Gender	Country	Total (%)	The Abortion Should Be Allowed		The Abortion Should Be Allowed		An Abortion Should Be Allowed	
			Should Give Birth <sup>a</sup>	for Mother's Health <sup>b</sup>	for Economic Hardship <sup>c</sup>	as a Woman's Right <sup>d</sup>	Other	Do Not Know
Male	United States	100.0	29.9	25.2	7.4	30.1	1.7	5.7
	Japan	100.0	15.2	30.5	29.1	19.2	0.4	5.6
Female	United States	100.0	29.0	24.8	5.1	35.0	2.1	4.0
	Japan	100.0	12.2	34.4	36.6	13.7	0.7	2.4

a. No matter what the reasons are, she should give birth.

b. When there is a high risk in which pregnancy can seriously harm the mother's health, the abortion should be allowed.

c. In addition to the reasons in Footnote b, if the pregnancy will cause serious economic hardship, the abortion should be allowed.

Source: International Survey of Low Fertility Societies, 2005.

justify an abortion; at the same time, 30% of men and 35% of women state that abortion is always justified as every woman's right. Only 6% answer that abortion is justifiable if carrying a pregnancy to term is likely to lead to financial hardship in the family. Few Japanese respondents have such uncompromising views on abortions. Only 12% of women and 15% of men argue that once pregnant, a woman should give birth whatever the circumstances. Support for the notion of abortion as a woman's right is also not particularly strong: only 14% of women and 19% of men agree with it. Thirty-seven percent of Japanese women and 30% of men believe that an abortion is justified as a way of reducing economic hardship in the family. In sum, while Americans are divided into two camps with ethically opposite views, for most Japanese respondents abortions are not an ideological matter. A decision to have one is rather seen as a choice to a large extent determined by individual circumstances. In both the United States and Japan, single motherhood is associated with straightened means, and many single mothers live in poverty. The prevailing abortion attitudes, however, suggest

that a Japanese woman is more likely to opt for an abortion as a means of avoiding economic hardship than an American one.

The acceptability of abortion in Japan has been facilitated by the absence of Christianity-inspired respect for unborn life (LaFleur, 1992). The history of abortion introduction in Japan also played a role. Abortion became available on demand in Japan in 1949, much earlier than in the United States, and for decades afterwards was conceptualized as a form of birth control by the general public (Coleman, 1983; Norgren, 2001).

The following comparisons of qualitative evaluations of abortions by unwed mothers confirm that Japanese women are much less likely than American women to view abortion as morally problematic. Moreover, in Japan an abortion is often seen as the most responsible solution for an unwanted pregnancy by women themselves and their families.

### *Abortion as the Most Responsible Solution Versus the Least Responsible Solution*

For American low-income women only really desperate circumstances were believed to warrant an abortion. In the United States, “mothers who choose abortion when they have the means to avoid it are viewed as immature at best and immoral at worst, unable or unwilling to face up to the consequences of their own actions” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 47). This moral dimension almost never came into play in Japan. When it became obvious that marriage was not an option, most women in our sample considered an abortion. Kyoko, a 42-year-old mother of a 4-year-old girl was typical. When she discovered her extramarital pregnancy, her main feeling was,

“I am seriously in trouble.” For a while I thought I cannot give birth, and the only thing to do was to have an abortion, although I did not want to have an abortion. Of course I did not think of giving birth in the beginning.

For her abortion was an obvious solution “because I was alone, I was not married and I knew marriage [with the child’s father] was impossible [since he was already married].”

For an American woman keeping a child offered an opportunity to demonstrate “maturity and high moral stature” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 48). The majority of Japanese women interviewed felt that the most responsible thing to do for themselves, their families, and society in general was to have an abortion. Having a child outside wedlock is just “something which should not

be done” in the words of Akiko, a 47-year-old never-married woman raising an 8-year-old daughter. In a striking reversal of Western Christian-inspired norms, both unwed mothers and those around them often felt that few fates including abortion are worse for a child than being born outside wedlock. Noriko, a 39-year-old university graduate raising a 4-year-old son, remembered how “everyone told me to have an abortion. ‘I will come along to the hospital (to support you through an abortion)’—they would say—‘won’t your child be pitiful?’ Almost everyone thought this way.”

Throughout their pregnancies our interviewees were constantly encouraged to have an abortion. Keiko hid her pregnancy from her father and older brother because she was sure they would make her have an abortion. She confided into her mother:

But of course mum said ‘Both you and the child that will be born will be pitiful, you should have an abortion!’ She kept calling me every evening saying: ‘Have an abortion, have an abortion! It won’t be good, not for you, [not for anyone]!’ It was like that, she did not listen to anything I said, so I became scared of talking to her and avoided it as much as possible. Only when it was about a month before I was to give birth my mother . . . gave up.

The experience of Kyoko was also fairly typical: “I went to the hospital straight away [after suspecting a pregnancy], did the [pregnancy] test and because I was unmarried I was immediately told until when roughly I could have an abortion.” In sum, in Japan both women’s own attitudes and attitudes of those around them tended to support abortion. In the face of this pressure from all sides, *not* having an abortion was the difficult choice.

Beliefs that abortion is the more responsible way out explain how some women such as Umeko, a 27-year-old pharmacist, could argue that they seriously considered an abortion because they wanted to be good mothers. Umeko was 7 months pregnant at the time of the interview. The father of her child refused to marry her, and after a lengthy consideration she decided to have a child outside marriage. Yet she continued to doubt her choice:

I always imagined that when I have a child I will be a mother who has prepared a tasty snack and is waiting when her child comes home from school. But if I become a single mother I cannot manage financially without working, yet I wanted to be with the child. . . . I thought probably I should not [have a child alone, but should rather have an abortion].

Edin and Kefalas's (2005) study shows how different the experiences of American mothers were in this respect. When Mahkiya, "age twenty," faced a strong pressure from her boyfriend to have an abortion it was her grandmother who warned her "that she might 'never have another [chance to] have a baby so you enjoy this'" (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, pp. 50, 51) and so strengthened her desire to have her child. Then it was the mother of her boyfriend (Mike) "who initiated a campaign of her own to convince Mike it was immoral to 'force someone to get rid of their baby'" (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 51) and so helped reduce the negative pressure on her. Unmarried and pregnant Japanese women did not have such support.

In sum, in the same circumstances it is likely to be much easier for an American woman to opt for having a child out of wedlock and for a Japanese woman to have an abortion. We can expect this difference to contribute to higher rates of unwed motherhood in the United States.

## Conclusion

This article analyzed the implications of the preferences for various solutions to premarital pregnancies for outside-wedlock childbearing trends in two countries: Japan and the United States.

Students of changing patterns of childbearing outside wedlock in the United States have pointed out the growing perception of marriage as a luxury to be strived for rather than a necessary precondition for childbearing and child rearing (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). More American women these days prefer bearing and rearing children alone to entering a suboptimal marriage that in their view has a high probability of eventual dissolution. In this article, we demonstrated that such attitudes and concerns are virtually outside the range of experiences of Japanese women. Rather than being a luxury, marriage is seen as a crucial prerequisite for childbearing and bringing up a happy child. Most women who end up having children outside wedlock were eager but not able to marry the biological fathers of their children because those were already married to somebody else already or just refused to marry them. In Japan, the father's presence is perceived to be much more important than partner compatibility. This intrinsic value ascribed to marriage, which is independent of its quality, is a strong incentive for unmarried and pregnant women to enter "shotgun" marriages even with less than ideal partners.

In both Japan and the United States, raising a child outside marriage is associated with financial hardship. Differently than in the United States, expected financial hardship is seen in Japan as a serious reason to consider aborting the expected child. Interview analysis suggests that, whereas in the

United States carrying a premarital pregnancy to term is perceived to be a more mature choice, in Japan abortion is often seen as a more responsible solution and is encouraged by everyone from doctors to family members.

This study provides evidence that attitudes to alternatives to premarital childbearing—"shotgun" marriage and abortion—play an important role in the way the norm of childbearing within marriage is maintained and add to our understanding of both high and low rates of premarital childbearing in different societies. This analysis is a complement and potential corrective to existing literature, which concentrates on the variation of disadvantages unmarried mothers face in different societies as an explanation for the differences in incidence of childbearing outside wedlock. Much has been said about the strength of economic, legal, and cultural deterrents to out-of-wedlock childbearing in contemporary Japan and the weakening of cultural and economic obstacles to single motherhood in the United States over the past few decades. In contrast, individual preferences for various solutions to premarital pregnancies have been used to explain the high rates of premarital childbearing in one society (the United States) but have not yet been applied to a non-Western society in a comparative context. Our application of the theory developed by Edin and Kefalas (2005) allows testing the generalizability of their findings beyond the Western context.

Analysis of the mechanisms that maintain norms has important implications for predicting normative change. The preferences for a "shotgun" marriage or an abortion as solutions for premarital conceptions in Japan suggest that even labor market improvements, better welfare provision, abolition of legal discrimination, and more tolerant attitudes to premarital childbearing may not lead to rapid spread of childbearing outside marriage. Many Japanese women are still likely to choose "shotgun" marriages or abortions not to avoid material costs and social stigma of having a child outside wedlock but just because they see them as better choices for both themselves and their prospective children.

As the number of premarital conceptions is growing in Japan there are two possible scenarios of future family formation. If Japanese women continue to be able to secure "shotgun" marriages, a growing proportion of marriages may be suboptimal from the points of view of both parties involved. Much research has been done on the effects of growing up with a single parent, but we know little about the effect of growing up with parents who feel they might have done better than marrying each other. Such unions may be at a greater risk of dissolution and have negative effects on children.

Alternatively, if fewer men feel compelled to marry their pregnant girlfriends, this is likely to make more women terminate their premarital

pregnancies. As today more than a quarter of all births in Japan have been conceived premaritally, such a change is likely to lead to a dramatic drop in Japanese fertility rate.

Further research into men's attitudes is necessary before we can assess the likelihood of the two scenarios.

Our findings also indicate that preference hierarchy when it comes to various solutions to premarital pregnancies should be a focus of research in other countries in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere, as it is an important corrective to existing approaches focused on incentives that relate only to childbearing outside wedlock as such without systematically engaging with women's evaluation of alternatives. Such research will provide valuable insights into the generalizability of the explanations for the changing relationship between marriage and childbearing developed in this article.

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