‘The worst abuse against a child is the absence of a parent’: how Japanese unwed mothers evaluate their decision to have a child outside wedlock

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Abstract: In this article I argue that childrearing norms play a key role in discouraging women from having children outside wedlock in contemporary Japan. I first summarize data which suggest that economic and legal discrimination, the two reasons most commonly used to account for the rarity of unwed mothers, although playing an important role, are insufficient to explain the phenomenon. Then I present evidence of the crucial role childrearing norms play. I proceed to argue that adherence to these norms is strengthened by perceptions of the malleability of children. The article concludes with an explanation of why social norms have a much greater effect on unwed than on divorced mothers.

Keywords: Illegitimate children, unmarried mothers, family norms, childrearing, divorce

When I asked Yoshiko, a professional nurse, about her relationship with the father of her child she explained that ‘before pregnancy I lived with him, we lived on my earnings. He never did anything more than a part-time job. We talked about this [when the pregnancy was discovered]. [He said] I like my life as it is. You work, care for the child and do all the housework, I won’t help.’ Under these conditions he was willing to consider marriage. Fully aware that taking care of both a husband and a child would be harder than just raising her child alone, Yoshiko still jumped at her chance. The marriage eventually did not happen because the groom discovered that Yoshiko had epilepsy and backed off. At the time of the interview Yoshiko was combining work with childcare so successfully that her boss encouraged her to do a PhD to hone her qualifications. Nevertheless she still maintained she would marry the father of her child if only she could.
Yoshiko was one of the never-married mothers I interviewed as part of my re- 
search on Japanese lone unwed mothers. Although I already had a strong interest 
in this social minority, it was not until I heard Yoshiko’s story that my research 
question finally crystallized for me. Why does virtually anything – be it a bad mar-
riage or an abortion – seem more attractive to the majority of Japanese women than 
having an illegitimate child? This is the question this article will address. Why do 
Japanese women from backgrounds as diverse as day labourers and highly trained 
professionals, and with very different ideological orientations, evaluate their de-
cisions to have a child outside wedlock in a similar, negative way?

My goal in studying unwed mothers’ perceptions of illegitimacy and its alterna-
tives is broader than simply trying to understand this group per se. Understanding 
their decisions also provides a window through which to look at the childbearing 
choices of other Japanese women: unwed mothers’ experiences and their ambiva-
lence about the decision to carry an extramarital pregnancy to term put the dom-
inant presumptions and expectations associated with marriage, family, childbear-
ing and childrearing in contemporary Japan into sharp relief. There is considerable 
research looking at traditional family norms in Japan from various perspectives 
Lock 1996; Takeda 2005; Uno 1999). These studies are invaluable sources of in-
formation on marriage incentives and family values in contemporary Japan. None 
of them, however, can help us to make sense of puzzlingly low illegitimacy rates 
against the background of social and economic changes in contemporary Japan.

Figure 1 shows that the cumulative decisions of Japanese women are truly ex-
ceptional. Strikingly different from Western industrialized societies, there has 
been practically no increase in births outside wedlock since the Second World 
War.

When Japanese statistics on illegitimacy are put into international comparative 
perspective, it may seem tempting to argue that Japan is socially conservative and 
hence lagging behind the West in decoupling marriage and childbearing. However, 
most changes in family-related trends in contemporary Japan are similar to those 
of other industrialized countries. To mention just a few: the average marriage 
age has increased for both men and women, the association of sex and marriage 
has sunk into oblivion, the fertility rate is falling, families are getting smaller and 
the numbers of cohabiting couples and of single-person households are on the 
rise. Looking at the divorce rate (see Figure 2), it is immediately obvious that in 
this regard Japan has now caught up with Western industrialized countries. The 
persistently low incidence of unwed lone motherhood against this background of 
social change is all the more puzzling.

Investigation of the decisions that pregnant but unwed Japanese women face will 
contribute to the growing body of literature that tries to make sense of illegitimacy 
trends in contemporary industrialized countries (Edin and Kelfas 2005; Ermisch 
2005; Wu and Wolfe 2001). In addition, the rapidly aging society and the onset 
of population decline in Japan have turned falling fertility into a hot policy issue.
Sources: adapted from data provided by Prof. David Coleman, Oxford. All the figures are from Eurostat, Council of Europe, US Census Bureau, Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare in Japan (various years).

Figure 1 Illegitimate children per 1,000 children.

Sources: Eurostat, US Census Bureau, Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare in Japan (various years)

Figure 2 Crude divorce rate.
The positive correlation that is emerging between non-marital and overall fertility across industrialized countries (Rindfuss et al. 2003) suggests that understanding the considerations that underlie the childbearing decisions of unmarried Japanese women who find themselves pregnant will be crucial for analysing the options and limits of the state’s demographic policies.

The article is organized as follows. I first offer a summary of the legal and economic background against which unwed mothers make and evaluate their choices. Then I present evidence highlighting the crucial role childrearing norms play in discouraging women from having children outside wedlock. I conclude with a discussion of why these norms have a much greater effect on unwed than on divorced mothers. At the end of my analysis I offer some comments on the policy implications of my findings.

**Economic and legal discrimination against unwed mothers**

Economic difficulties (Aoki 2003; Ezawa 2002; Matsubara et al. 1999; Peng 1997) or legal discrimination (Wright 2007; Yoshizumi 1997) are the commonest explanations for the almost universal compliance with the norm that prescribes having children inside marital unions. I have discussed the economic and legal disadvantages unwed mothers face elsewhere (Korobtseva 2006), so I will offer here only a brief summary of the limitations of these explanations.

Cross-country comparisons show that the labour environment is far from women-friendly in Japan, especially for lone mothers. A somewhat different picture emerges, however, when – rather than comparing Japan with the West – we put things into historical perspective. The labour market situation of women in Japan has improved over the past few decades (Rebick 2006: 85–9). The gender gap in earnings has narrowed (Rebick 2005: 116). The variety and availability of family friendly policies has improved considerably (Roberts 2002). None of this, however, has had a discernible impact on the number of unwed single mothers.

Not all labour market changes have been positive. The earnings gap between part-time and full-time employees has been widening. As it is mainly women who work part-time, this trend chiefly affects them. It is particularly difficult for a woman to secure a full-time job if she is caring for a child. Badly paid part-time jobs are one of the reasons why in 2006 the average income of a lone mother family was only 2.13 million yen a year (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2006a). To compare, the income of the average household was 5.638 million yen a year (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2006a). As shown in Figure 2, however, low incomes do not seem to discourage women from divorce as much as they discourage them from premarital childbearing.

Welfare provision for unwed mothers has changed dramatically over the past decades. While until the 1980s their access to welfare was severely limited, in 1999 these limitations were removed. Today the only difference between unwed mothers and divorcees as regards welfare policy is the ineligibility of the former for income tax concessions. The disadvantages unwed mothers face in comparison...
with divorced mothers seem too small to provide an adequate explanation for the huge difference in their numbers. In fact, while the gap in welfare provisions has been narrowing, the gap in numbers between divorced and unwed mothers has been rapidly expanding. In addition a cross-country comparison of levels of social assistance for lone parent families suggests that the relationship between the rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing and generosity of assistance is far from straightforward. A study of twenty-two industrialized countries locates Japan in the lower half of the spectrum, suggesting that opting for lone motherhood may be more difficult in Japan than in many other countries. Yet the social assistance levels are even lower in Italy, Spain and the USA, three countries that Figure 1 shows to have a much higher level of illegitimate childbearing than Japan (Bradshaw and Finch 2002: 17).

The second commonly cited explanation for the rarity of unwed mothers is the legal discrimination they are subjected to under the Japanese family registry system. The family registry makes unwed mothers and illegitimate children relatively easily identifiable (Bryant 1991), thus enforcing differentiation between types of lone mothers and arguably facilitating stigmatization. However, similar to economic discrimination, legal discrimination has been reduced substantially over the past decades. The most salient changes include restriction of access to the family registry in 1976, abolition of differences in the ways illegitimate and legitimate children are recorded in the household registry effective from 1995 and, finally, unification of the ways illegitimate and legitimate children are defined in the family registry in 2005. The 1995 change is probably the most important one since, after the restriction of third-party access to the family registry, the household registry has been used in its stead in many walks of life. These changes have made it easier for unwed mothers and illegitimate children to hide their status from most people if they wish to do so and thus avoid discrimination.

In sum, the significant economic and legal discrimination against unwed mothers cannot be ignored in our attempts to understand illegitimate childbearing trends. Yet at the same time the demonstrable reduction of both economic and legal disadvantages so far has not led to a significant increase in the numbers of illegitimate children, which puts the sufficiency of legal and economic explanations into question. Drawing upon actual experiences of Japanese unwed mothers, this article will suggest additional causes which arguably are at least as important.

**Data and methods**

I have chosen to rely mostly on qualitative methods for my investigation of single mothers’ decision-making for several reasons. To this day little academic research has been done on unwed mothers in contemporary Japan. The few studies available look for an answer through the prism of available statistics (Atoh 2001; Thomson 2005), but unfortunately existing data are rather limited. The biggest survey of unwed mothers to date was done by the Japan Institute of Labour in
2003 (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō 2003), but some caution is necessary in interpreting its results given that the sample was only eighty-nine women. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is known to be invaluable in mapping out uncharted areas and has long proved to be the most suitable for carrying out research on sensitive issues (Lee 1993). The unique contribution of this article is its in-depth individual-level analysis that offers us glimpses of internalized beliefs that inform decisions.

My field work was carried out between June 2004 and May 2005. I conducted sixty-eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with unwed mothers. I also carried out interviews with a small comparison group of twelve divorcees. To ensure diversity and avoid the risk of a uniformly skewed sample I used several ways of contacting interviewees. These included grass-roots groups, welfare institutions, personal contacts and advertisements of my research in the internet chat rooms for lone mothers.

When looking for interviewees I specifically aimed for variation in the following categories: age, income, education, employment type and residence at the time the decision about childbirth was made. I interviewed women in the urban Kansai and Kantō areas, as well as in rural Fukuoka and Tottori prefectures. The age of my interviewees at the time of interview varied from 19 to 73, with the majority in their 30s or 40s, an age distribution similar to that of the sample in the Japan Institute of Labour survey of unwed mothers. My interviewees’ age at childbirth varied from 18 to 44. In terms of educational background, they ranged from junior high-school graduates to women with doctorate degrees. Forty-four per cent of unwed mothers I interviewed were employed full-time, 31 per cent had various non-full-time working arrangements, 6 per cent were self-employed and 19 per cent were unemployed. This compared to 23.6, 41.5, 10.1 and 22.5 per cent respectively in the Japan Institute of Labour sample (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō 2003: 308, 326).

Of the unemployed women in my sample 12 per cent lived primarily on welfare and 7 per cent had no income. The lowest income in my sample was 0 (this woman was living on the remnants of her savings while considering applying for welfare support), while the unwed mother with the highest income earned 12 million yen a year. The average income was 2.7 million yen a year, which compared to a national average for unwed mothers of 2.33 million yen a year in 2003 (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō 2003: 358).

The age of the divorcees I interviewed varied from 21 to 52 and their age at childbirth varied from 15 to 33. The level of education ranged from junior high school to university graduate. Some of them had only part-time jobs and some were employed full-time. Their average income was 2.5 million yen.

**Experiencing unwed motherhood**

Being unmarried and pregnant turned out to have been a miserable experience for many women. Tomoko, a 39-year-old full-time employed university graduate,
shuddered when she remembered the time of her pregnancy. ‘I was so scared. I felt as if I was doing something really wrong. When going to the gynaecologist for medical check-ups I kept thinking: what if someone sees me? What shall I say? I was so wretched.’

Such distress seems surprising in a society where the mother–child bond is believed to be the most important and meaningful of human bonds and where lone motherhood is no longer a rare experience. Half of my interviewees had a lone mother acquaintance, friend or relative, usually divorced, at the time they discovered their pregnancy. In the following I will argue that the feeling of insecurity is better explained by internalized childrearing norms, which maintain that a lone mother cannot provide a suitable environment for a child to grow up in, rather than by fear of the unknown or worries about material discrimination. In the last section I will explore why unwed mothers are much more susceptible to these norms than divorcees.

Children’s malleability

Before examining my interviewees’ beliefs, a few words have to be said about the strong beliefs in parental responsibility in Japan in general and where they come from. In the West, there has been an ongoing scientific debate about whether we turn out to be as we are due chiefly to our genetic predisposition or to our environment (Harris 1998; Pinker 2002). While it still is and will for a long time be impossible to tell precisely how much our personalities depend on nature and how much on nurture, understood to include all environmental factors such as parenting, neighbourhood, etc., it is accepted in both Western academia and society in general that both of these factors matter. In post-war Japanese society, however, the emphasis has been heavily on nurture, especially on parental care.

Existing academic research on the Japanese family documents how important parental and especially maternal care is perceived to be for the way a child turns out (Borovoy 2005: esp. ch. 2; Fujita 1989; Ivry 2006; Jolivet 1997; White 1993). The implications of this perception are far-reaching. ‘[I]n Japan eventual success is not assumed to depend on one’s innate capacities but on virtuous characteristics one can develop. Hence potential is regarded in Japan as egalitarian – everyone has it but some work harder to develop it than others’ (White 1987: 19). Once a child reaches school age, this potential is expected to be assessed and developed through education. Goodman notes that ‘[i]n most of the literature on teaching and learning in Japan the child is described as tabula rasa who learns through imitation and effort, in opposition to the western idea of education wherein the child is seen as having innate abilities which need to be drawn out by a teacher’ (2003: 17). This perceived importance of formal education in moulding children does not reduce the role of parenting, however; if anything it increases it. As the emphasis is on effort, not on talent, the parental contribution is seen as essential in motivating the child to make the required effort. It is not exceptional (see
Sasagawa 2006) for a childrearing adviser to preach: ‘One must be so smart to be a good mother these days. Did you know that only one out of every four children is born smart? Sixty per cent of children’s intelligence comes from their mothers’ (Borovoy 2005: 139). A suitable family environment is argued to be the crucial counterpart of formal education and a necessary condition for the child to be able to achieve the best possible results.

Sociologist Jon Elster points out that ‘[w]e do not blame people for what is outside their control’ (1999: 163). In Japan, children’s educational achievements, which to a large extent determine their success in later life (Ishida 1998), are believed to be much more in their parents’ and most of all mothers’ control than in the West. The difficulty of making it through ‘examination hell’ into a good university followed by a good job means that parents are expected to offer all the support they can to their children to ensure their success. As I will show below, having a child outside wedlock is believed to violate this crucial imperative and have disastrous and long-lasting effects on the child’s life.

The disastrous effect of growing up in a lone-parent family

One of the consistently recurring elements in my interviews was the feeling of guilt unwed mothers experienced before their future child for condemning him or her to grow up in a lone-parent family. Many, like Sachiko, a 32-year-old college graduate in full-time employment, worried that the innocent child will be made to ‘think miserable thoughts’ because of the mother’s ‘wrongdoing’. Often these women explicitly differentiated themselves from their child and lived in constant fear that, even if everything goes smoothly for them, the child may be suffering.9 These feelings are best exemplified by Yumiko, a 46-year-old civil servant with a university degree, who mused: ‘It is OK for me as it is now. But what does the child think? It is a little bit... I wonder if there is something wrong with me?’

When I asked my interviewees whether growing up in a lone-mother family affects their child the first reaction usually was – ‘badly?’ I then emphasized that my question was about any effect positive or negative, just some effect. Still the reply I received was in most cases based on the presumption that there must be a negative effect. When I specifically asked women whether they could think of any positive effect of their unmarried status on the child, almost all were at a loss. This view of the child as a victim of the mother’s selfish wish to give birth was held irrespective of the quality of life the women were able to provide for their children.

Masako, the woman who registered the most distress about her child’s fate, was in fact in full-time, reasonably well-paid employment, lived in her parents’ home, so did not have to pay rent and was able to rely on her own mother for extensive childcare support. Although her 7-year-old daughter appeared cheerful and bright at the time of the interview, Masako thought about the future in a very gloomy way. ‘The child is pitiful, she may be told unpleasant things in the future. When I
think of what is to come I feel insecure, it is hard. Whatever happens to me is fine, but was this really good for this child? She is pitiful. It is hard to think the child is thinking unpleasant thoughts.’ At this point Masako started crying and became so upset that I had to abort the interview. This experience sensitized me to the force of the implicit belief in the necessity of the two-parent family for a child’s well-being in Japan. But what was behind this belief?

**What makes the two-parent family seem so crucial?**

When unpacked, the belief in the necessity of a two-parent family for a child turned out to be based ultimately on a belief in the extreme difference between male and female roles in the family. We have all heard about the models for an ideal man and an ideal woman: a salaryman and a professional housewife. While one may question to what extent real men and women conform to this extreme gender role differentiation, the widespread conviction that the difference exists is undeniable. My interviews showed that the association of lone-mother families with substandard parenting was based on two complementary beliefs about paternal and maternal role performance. A father’s presence was deemed necessary for a child’s normal development and a woman alone was believed to be unable to realize herself fully as a mother.

‘It is hard without a proper father’

The belief that fathers were necessary and irreplaceable persisted in spite of unwed mothers’ mostly negative experiences with the fathers of their children. Their distress over the lack of the father figure also seemed to fly in the face of reality in Japanese society at large. According to statistics, in Japan the average father of a 0- to 6-year-old child with a working wife spends 0.4 hours (24 minutes) a day on child care (compared to 1.9 hours for the wife) and 0.4 hours a day on housework (compared to 3.8 hours for the wife) (quoted in Satô and Takeishi 2004: 38). This raises the question of what exactly unwed mothers thought they and their children were missing without a father in the family.

Some women I interviewed had viewed the father as the final authority in disciplining children. Several interviewees confessed they felt unsure as to how to chasten their offspring properly without a father on whose authority they could rely. Like Hana, a 34-year-old junior high-school graduate in part-time employment, many believed it important that there is ‘one parent that scolds and one that indulges’. Some went as far as to suggest that it is a problem ‘for a human if there is no scary figure, no leader. In that sense if there is no father, it is a handicap.’ One might argue, however, that even married women whose husbands work in different cities must have the same problem, not to mention divorcees and widows.

Some insights on how the father can be largely absent and at the same time held as essential can be gleaned from the study by Ishii-Kunz (1993).
the ways married Japanese women coped with the fact that their husbands spent little time with their children. Raising their children virtually alone, these women built an image of an ideal father for them, an image they then used as a role model and continuously appealed to.

Understanding the need for a father as the need for a masculine role model throws light on the important problem divorcees and unwed lone mothers face compared to women whose husbands work in a different city. In the former two cases the father of their children abandoned them. It is therefore impossible to construct him as virtuous but busy and thereby get around the problem of his absence the way married women do. To make matters worse, it is a popular Japanese belief that children learn by imitation (Goodman 2003: 17). This makes the absence of the correct masculine role model a major drawback. Unwed mothers with sons saw this as an almost insurmountable problem. Nobuko, a 38-year-old college graduate in full-time employment, felt that ‘because he is a boy it would be good if he was taught how to live as a man. Obviously because I am a woman I think there is something lacking.’ Unwed mothers with daughters tended to worry less. Even so, some women were concerned that their daughters may not be able to cope with men as a result of growing up in an all-female household. Rika, a 41-year-old high-school graduate in full-time employment, felt that ‘there are differences between men and women and it is better if she [my daughter] knows what men are. So I take her to play with families of friends.’

‘Explaining to the child – that is the most difficult thing’

The problem of telling an illegitimate child about the circumstances of his or her birth loomed large for 60 per cent of the unwed mothers I interviewed, reflecting the perceived importance of constructing a decent father figure for children. The best strategy to adopt when telling one’s child the circumstances of his or her birth was among the most popular topics at informal meetings of lone-mother support groups. It also came up time and again as an important theme in my interviews. There were eight women who told their children the truth about the circumstances of their birth early on and did not perceive explaining the situation to them as a huge dilemma. These were mainly from an unconventional minority, discussed below, who were less concerned with the effects of illegitimacy on the child. The majority, however, agreed with Kaeko, a 36-year-old professional school graduate, living on welfare at the time of the interview, who felt that ‘explaining to the child – that is the most difficult thing’. Many women feared that fragile young children would not be able to bear the truth about their parents’ relationship and kept putting off the explanation. ‘When she reaches a certain age.’ ‘I do not want her to know till she becomes an adult. If she finds out during her adolescent years and is psychologically damaged that would be pitiful.’ This kind of time frame and justification was often mentioned by my interviewees.
It was not uncommon for unwed mothers to think it would be easier to tell their children that they were divorcees or widows rather than to admit they gave birth outside wedlock. Mika, a 41-year-old high school graduate in part-time employment, mused ‘maybe it would be good to say he died?’ During my interview with Natsuko, a 43-year-old high school graduate in full-time employment, her 7-year-old son, Takashi, started questioning her about his birth:

Takashi: Mom were you married? Why did you have a child? Why were you married?
Natsuko: I was [married].
Takashi: To whom?
Natsuko: To someone I liked very much.
Takashi: What is the name? Takuya?
Natsuko: Takuya is mother’s older brother.
Takashi: To whom?
Natsuko: I will tell you later. What do you want to know? I am not married now.

This dialogue shows quite vividly how difficult it is for many women to tell their children that they were born outside marriage. When cornered by her son Natsuko resorts to lying, claiming there was a marriage in the past. At the same time she has much less difficulty pointing out that she ‘is not married now’, leaving Takashi to presume that she has had a divorce. Clearly Natsuko feels that knowing that his parents have had a divorce is somehow less damaging for Takashi than her coming out as an unwed mother.

Fifty-five per cent of the fathers of my interviewees’ children were already married to someone else at the time of the pregnancy. Twenty-nine per cent abandoned the mothers the moment they heard about the pregnancy while 25 per cent chose to spend some time trying to cajole or threaten the women into having an abortion. Thus, the difficulty unwed mothers faced constructing a positive father image without resorting to lying surpassed that of divorcees, not to speak of widows and ‘properly’ married women. The only positive thing my interviewees could say about some of the fathers was: ‘He did not demand an abortion. Though he said he will never meet me or the child.’ For others even this was impossible, so the mothers concentrated on avoiding presenting these fathers negatively. Kaeko, a 36-year-old professional school graduate living on welfare at the time of the interview, was adamant that ‘I definitely do not want to talk badly about the father. Of course I do not want to glorify him either. I just [will say the relationship was] a bit [problematic] in an ordinary way.’ In fact this father’s reaction when he found out he was going to have a child can hardly be called ordinary. He was so much against the birth of his child that even after the baby was born he continued to terrify Kaeko with vague threats. When she called him from the hospital to tell him that their child had been born he retorted: ‘Do not tell your family or work colleagues anything unnecessary about the child. If you do tell [them about me].
... You be prepared!' Kaeko got so upset she could not sleep and had to be put on medication.

The Japanese family registry system limits the possibilities for representing the father creatively. Although accessing a stranger’s family registry has become progressively more difficult over the past decades, the level of detail of information noted in the registry has not changed very much. This allows children to find out quite a lot about their parents’ relationship once they are 18 and have the right to access their own register without the guardian’s consent. This problem contributed to many women’s worries. As Michiko, a 28-year-old high school graduate in full-time employment, put it ‘[n]ow she does not understand. She is still in day care. These days divorce is common, there are many homes where there is only a mother, right? So it is OK to tell people you have had a divorce. What shall I tell [the child]? She will understand once she sees the family register. If only this will somehow, somehow...I [am thinking] already now what to say.’

Women’s desire to present fathers in a positive light sometimes resulted in deliberate efforts to make their relationship look better at least on the register. At the time of the interview Kaeko was going through court mediation with the father of her child to get him to acknowledge his son. As the DNA test confirmed his paternity, Kaeko could get the forced acknowledgement any time she wished. She felt, however, that since the type of acknowledgement gets recorded, forced acknowledgement should be avoided at all costs. Having a forced acknowledgement in the record would mean that she would not be able to tell her son that the father was happy about him being born. For similar reasons several women believed that getting their child acknowledged was their duty. Their inability to secure even the father’s acknowledgement suggests complete non-cooperation from the father or that the mother does not know even who the father is, reflecting badly on both parents and potentially making the child feel rejected.

‘A child obviously would not grow up without a mother’

So far I have shown that unwed mothers felt the absence of fathers to a large extent as the lack of a reference point. What about the role of the father as provider, much highlighted in the literature? The following section will argue that this function is indeed seen as very important. Notably, however, desire for the father-provider was only marginally dependent on the actual material circumstances of a mother. The most common reason given for his importance was a conviction that the presence of a father-provider makes it possible to perform one’s role as an ideal mother.

Mothers are expected to take sole responsibility for virtually all the needs of their children and consequently, almost as an afterthought, they tend to be held responsible for virtually any problems their children may be facing (Fujita 1989; Hirao 2001; Ochiai 1997: 51). As noted earlier, in Japan a child’s success in life is to a significant extent determined by his or her performance in the education system. This performance in turn is believed to be predicated on the amount of effort
invested by the child and his mother as the main supporter. My interviewees were very aware that in Japan a woman is first of all judged by her accomplishments as a mother (cf. Hirao 2001: 201). When asked whether she ever faced prejudice or discrimination, Mieko explained that now that her daughter was developing very well all was going fine. Yet, Mieko explained, she added that she realized that if anything went wrong, if her daughter became unruly or slow in the kindergarten, her family situation would be seen as the main reason and she as the mother would be the person to blame.

The growth in the numbers of working mothers and of children attending day care, which reached 2,118,352 in 2006 (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2006b), has made the imperative for the mother to dedicate all her time to her child weaken if not disappear in recent years. Among my interviewees, few felt guilt for not spending all the time with their child and 75 per cent of my interviewees believed that having a working mother has its benefits. There was one important caveat, however. Women did not feel guilty as long as their children were doing well. But if the child had any problems, the mothers as well as everyone around them felt it was their duty to be with the child and continuously support him or her. Without another provider in the family, however, they could not afford to do this and this produced a strong sense of guilt and made women fear for their children’s future. Mothers are seen as persons who can and should mould their children into better human beings: an inability to dedicate oneself to full-time mothering, whatever the circumstances, is seen as the main cause of problematic children. This perception is rarely questioned in Japan although in reality there is no research on Japanese data and no solid evidence in studies on Western industrialized countries that lone motherhood per se carries adverse consequences for the children born into these families (Ni Brolchain 2001; Wu and Wolfe 2001: xxvii). Moreover, in many of the cases in my sample things were going well for the child and scenarios in which women would have been unable to dedicate enough time to mothering remained hypothetical.

Ogasawara writes at length about the construction of men’s and women’s roles at work. One of her key points is that men’s duties are perceived so broadly that men often have to assume responsibility for the behaviour of their female subordinates (1998: 125). By extension I think one can argue that in the family domain women are held responsible for the well-being of the family (apart from its purely economic well-being), including ensuring a two-parent family for their children. If forming a two-parent family is impossible, it is assumed that a woman should choose an abortion. The strength of this assumption is illustrated by the story of Noriko, a 39-year-old university graduate in full-time employment. She was dating a man for several years and they were engaged to be married when she discovered her pregnancy. Noriko happily started preparing to get married. At this point her boyfriend told Noriko that he recently met another woman whom he wanted to be with and wanted Noriko to have an abortion. After lengthy and painful consideration, Noriko decided to have the child anyway, only to face strong accusations from her ex-fiancé. ‘He could not accept that his child would be born
that way. In this case naturally he starts blaming the woman. Like “it is all your fault”.

In sum, being a lone mother led to role confusion: mothers had to substitute for fathers and ‘a mother cannot understand the father’s role’. Spending time and energy on performing the father’s role also prevented women from performing their motherly roles to perfection. Consequently, ‘normalizing’ the children’s environment appeared among my interviewees’ top priorities.

**Attempting to create a ‘normal’ environment for the child**

The only way to create a truly ‘normal’ environment for the child was of course to marry the child’s father. That is exactly what many premaritally pregnant women in Japan do. In 2004 26.7 per cent of all legitimate first-born children were conceived before their mothers got married (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2005). About half of my interviewees strongly desired marriage with the biological fathers of their children, even with the seemingly least attractive ones. In my sample three women left the fathers of their children because they were abusive and still believed it would have been better for their children if they had stayed with those men and felt guilty for egoistically leaving them.

The option of marriage was in most cases closed for these women, however, because the man was already married to somebody else or just refused to cooperate. Given the circumstances, many women aimed to provide at least surrogate fathers. Hanako, for example, a 39-year-old college graduate in full-time employment, elaborated this point in great detail:

My older child is a son. In the case of a boy if he does not get more communication [with an adult man], he might become strange. I worry about that. That is why I am looking for people who will perform the father’s role for my children. My brother does it, grandfather does it, the husband of my younger sister does it and so on... I would like the children to have a person who will be a father for them by their side.

Given the perceived need for biological fathers and attempts to find surrogate fathers among friends and relatives, it seems at first glance odd that only 39.2 per cent of the unwed mothers in my sample, compared to 28.1 per cent in the Japan Institute of Labour survey (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō 2003: 460), say they would marry someone other than their child’s father if they had the chance. This rather limited enthusiasm for marriage appears to be an outcome of the perceived difficulties in dealing with reconstituted families, that is, those in which children from former relationships are brought into a new family, and concerns about their potential harmfulness for a child. Marrying anyone apart from the child’s biological father was often perceived as putting one’s own happiness ahead of that of the child. This was very clear in the response of Michiko, a 28-year-old high school graduate in full-time employment, gave when asked about a possibility of a
future marriage. ‘Do I want to? If I met a man whom I would like that much I think I want to marry. That much. If there was a man I liked more than the child. If the man likes children I think I would want to. But I am not in a hurry. These days there is a lot of child abuse, isn’t there? Towards other’s children. Because this happens often I am afraid.’ In this and many other cases, the biological father was seen as hard to substitute with another man. A deep-seated mistrust of reconstituted families and their association with child abuse seemed to be behind this emphasis on biological fathers.

Still, as pointed out above, not all women were opposed to the idea of marriage with a man other than their child’s father. For those of my interviewees who wished to marry, looking for a father figure for their child was an important reason. As Haruko, a 39-year-old contract employee with a university degree, elaborated, she was looking for more than simply marriage: ‘I want not only a partner for myself but also... someone who would be a father for Satoshi [her son]... Satoshi is a boy so raising him [alone] is obviously difficult.’ For some women having a child changed their whole outlook on marriage. Emiko, a 34-year-old self-employed university graduate, confessed ‘I never had awe for marriage as such. For a child, however, I think it is better if there is a father and a mother and they are married. I thought a lot about marriage. I think it will be better if I have a partner.’ If there is a chance in the future she thought she would marry.

Having a child made most women in my sample sensitive to the need for correct parental role performance. The majority of women were adamant that it must be the biological father, not any father, who must perform the paternal role, but a substantial minority saw a step-father as a possible proxy and were prepared to marry a man that would make a good father for their child.

In spite of all the norms discouraging illegitimate childbearing, there were twelve women in my sample who opted for unwed motherhood because they did not believe it to be inferior to marriage. In the next section I describe this unconventional minority of women and speculate whether they might be the prime movers heralding imminent social changes in the perceptions of unwed motherhood.

The unconventional minority

Women in this group varied considerably by age, education and income. The one thing they all had in common was a conviction that growing up in a lone-parent family does not affect children in a particularly adverse way. This conviction made the choice to have an illegitimate child much easier.

Five women from this unconventional minority were feminists who had extensive contacts with like-minded mothers, many of whom also formed alternative families. These contacts affected my interviewees in two ways. First, they knew unwed mothers whose children had grown up to be happy and successful. Second, they had extensive information and support networks. As Mariko, a 52-year-old university graduate in full-time employment, put it, ‘around me there were so
many [unwed mothers]. I really did not have any feeling that I was doing something hard from the very beginning.’

For the other women in this unusually laid-back minority it was their personal history rather than their convictions that had played a crucial role in determining their attitude to illegitimacy. A few of these women grew up in ‘non-standard’ families themselves. Remembering their own childhood experiences, they remained unconvinced that a father’s presence is absolutely necessary for the well-being of the child. Kazuko, a 35-year-old self-employed high school drop-out, who lost both of her biological parents early in her life and was raised by her maternal grandmother, said ‘I grew up in an environment with no parents. Even if I had had one parent it would have been great. Even with one parent a child will grow up. . . . The environment I grew up in made me think that way.’ Mayu’s mother divorced her father when Mayu was about 5 years old and she had only few and negative memories of him. Arguing that she herself was content growing up with in a fatherless family, she said she did not worry that her daughter would suffer from her choice of lone motherhood either.

Apart from having positive experiences outside two-parent families, confidence in one’s decision to have a child outside wedlock was sometimes based on negative experiences in two-parent families. Women who grew up in very poor communities with high rates of divorce saw many unhappy marriages of friends, relatives and acquaintances. This made them reflective about the value of marriage and sensitized to its possible drawbacks. Kaori, a 31-year-old high school graduate in part-time employment, remembered that, already in her 20s, ‘I thought marriage really limits you and did not have any particular awe [for it] . . . When I looked around there was hardly anyone who had a really happy marriage and was enjoying it, there was always some kind of trouble. If it is like that, one is happier alone or together with the child. I do not have any desire [for marriage].’ Holding unconventional views may also have been easier for women from poor communities, because there was little if any stigma attached to lone motherhood as a result of the high proportion of lone-mother families in these communities. Moreover, similar to feminists, women from poor communities were likely to have extensive information and support networks.

This section corroborates the previous argument that highlighted the strength of the perceived importance of the two-parent family. The belief that a one-parent family is a substandard environment for a child to grow up in was so powerful that almost nothing but personal experience to the contrary could overcome it. The fact that this group’s unconventionality was more often than not based on personal experiences rather than ideological convictions suggests these women are unlikely to reflect the beginning of a broad change in family values. There is, however, some indication that the decreasing stability of Japanese marriages and thus the increasing experience of ‘non-standard’ families may eventually bring about some erosion of the childbearing-within-marriage norm.
Throughout this article I have argued that it is perceptions of what an ideal family should be that make the choice to have a child outside wedlock such a painful one. In order to make this argument convincing, however, it is necessary to explain why unwed mothers would feel more guilt towards their children and be more susceptible to fear of the consequences than divorcees. Without such an explanation, it is impossible to resolve the puzzle of the huge disparity in numbers between unwed mothers and divorcees in contemporary Japan.

Why are unwed mothers particularly susceptible to guilt and fear of the consequences for their children of growing up in a lone-parent family?

Reproductive decisions necessarily involve a high level of insecurity because their outcomes are unpredictable, long-lasting and potentially costly. The key factor leading to this lack of confidence is that one cannot predict the future child’s happiness and success before he or she is born and this makes parents very susceptible to prevailing social norms. In Japan the chances of an undesirable outcome are believed to increase when a child is brought up by a lone mother.

Both divorced and unwed lone mothers bear some amount of responsibility for their children’s growing up in lone-parent families. Ambivalence about their choice of lone motherhood was not unknown to divorcees. Having divorced her thieving husband, 43-year-old university-educated Yukie worked full-time for many years, earning a comfortable income. Her daughter grew up looked after by caring and adoring grandparents. At the time of the interview Yukie was starting her own company. Nevertheless when a friend contemplating a divorce approached her seeking advice, Yukie counselled her against it because ‘there is a father’s role and a mother’s role. One cannot do it alone.’ Why then did these feelings of insecurity not force more women to stay in unsatisfactory marriages for the sake of their children?

The explanation for this question as it emerged from my interviews has two parts. First, unwed mothers felt more guilt towards their children because unlike divorcees they had the option of abortion. That is, apart from raising a child together with a man with whom they did not want to or could not stay or raising a child alone, they also had the option of ‘cancelling’ a child. Second, never having experienced marriage with the fathers of their children, unwed mothers were much more likely than divorced mothers to idealize marriage. With an ideal family as their reference point, unwed mothers were much more prone to feel that they robbed their children of happiness.

Abortion is easily available on demand in Japan. The prices are far from prohibitive, relevant laws are liberal and there is little associated stigma. One in six Japanese women aged 16 to 49 reports having had an abortion experience, and among those who had an abortion, 22 per cent say they ‘could not give birth because they were not married’ at the time (Yomiuri Shinbun 2005). According to my
interviewees’ accounts, unmarried and pregnant women are made very aware of the possible option of abortion. The experience of Kyōko, a 42-year-old full-time employed college graduate, was fairly typical: ‘I went to the hospital straight away [after suspecting pregnancy], did the [pregnancy] test and because I was unmarried I was immediately told until when roughly I could have an abortion. That is when I started worrying [what to do].’ Often women were not simply made aware but rather encouraged to take the option of abortion. Friends commonly offered to accompany them to hospitals for an abortion. Almost a third of the biological fathers of illegitimate children, including those who were sloppy in using contraception or even refused to use any, pressured their girlfriends to have an abortion as soon as they heard about the pregnancy. The women’s own parents also saw an abortion as by far the less stigmatizing and least complicated choice.16 With this pressure from all sides, it is not surprising that 35 per cent of unwed mothers in my sample gave serious thought to having an abortion and a few women even had made arrangements in hospitals and then reconsidered.

According to my interviewees, abortion quite often seemed less morally questionable than giving birth to an illegitimate child. Unwed mothers, as opposed to divorcees, had access to this ‘superior’ solution. As a result many were doomed to worry whether they were right to use it for years to come. This difference between them and divorcees was constantly reinforced by the environment. Haruko, comparing herself with her divorced cousin, illustrated this very poignantly:

My cousin... got married and had a child, but when the child was about two years old she got divorced. The reason at that time was that her husband started seeing another woman and so they split. At that time I was told the following thing and it really freaked me out. I am a lone mother, she is a lone mother too, but the way we are seen, the way other relatives see us [is different]: Haruko-chan became like that [a lone mother] because she wished to, she decided that herself, but Yuko-chan, it is as if she got into a traffic accident. In short, Yuko-chan is not at all to blame.

In sum, it was the active choice of unwed motherhood in the face of a morally unproblematic abortion that left unwed mothers so susceptible to guilt and open to blame.

Why would divorcees not be similarly predisposed to guilt for forgoing the ‘superior’ strategy of remaining in a marriage with the father of their children? My interviews showed that the crucial differences between unwed mothers and divorcees lay in the fact that the second had an experience of marriage with which to compare their singlehood. This made them much more sceptical about the marriage’s benefits. Thinking about the father their child did not have, unwed mothers imagined the kind of father appearing in magazines for expectant mothers and hospital brochures. He was nice, caring, spent time with the child, allowed the woman a chance to choose not to work: the best father one can imagine. Even
having had a very negative experience with the biological father of their child was often insufficient to prevent unwed mothers from these idealizations. On the other hand, divorcees have succeeded in forming a ‘normal’ family for their child and this family then became their reference point. In real families things do not go as smoothly as in magazines and brochures; a real man can never be as good as an ideal one. Rika, who had her older child within a marriage which eventually failed and her second child outside wedlock with a different man, described quite poignantly this change of perception from an ideal to a real marriage.

I retired when I got married. Back then, twenty years ago, in Japan everyone did this. At the company the atmosphere was that at the time of marriage one has to quit. Also I myself was dreaming that when one is married one does not have to work any more. So I quit. But about six months after the birth of the child my husband started gambling. So I had to start working and my older daughter grew up in day care. Since then [I started thinking] one could not rely on a man, they come up with weird things.

The reactions of people around them tended to reinforce this difference in perceptions. Divorcees were seen as people who tried to form a ‘normal’ family and their failure to do so was perceived as not exclusively their fault. Unwed mothers, on the other hand, were held solely responsible for their predicament and treated accordingly.

**Concluding remarks**

Having analysed the applicability of the theories most commonly used to explain the rise in the numbers of illegitimate children in the West to the experiences of Japanese unwed mothers, I found these theories wanting. Although economic disadvantages and stigmatization offer potential partial explanations, neither of them can account for the puzzlingly low illegitimacy ratio over time since both economic disadvantages and stigmatization of unwed mothers were reduced substantially over the same period of time.

It is a specific set of social norms, closely related to prevalent childrearing ideologies, that seems to account for the rarity of unmarried motherhood. Talking about their worries during pregnancies, unwed mothers brought the perceived importance of a two-parent family for a child to my attention time and again. The compulsion to form a two-parent family was based on women’s belief in the difference and complementarity of the parental roles. The conviction about the importance of a suitable environment for a child to grow up in as well as the definition of the suitable environment hardly varied among women of different ages and backgrounds. This absence of variability corresponds to the lack of change in the rate of illegitimate children born, underlining the importance of family norms in making out-of-wedlock childbearing a very hard choice. Only a small minority of women did not share the general belief in the importance
of the two-parent family for the child. These women’s liberal views were based on positive personal experiences with lone-parent families or very negative experiences with two-parent families. Conversely the dominant perception of the necessity of the two-parent family has little to do with personal experience and is much more related to prevailing Japanese family norms. Perception of abortion as morally unproblematic, its easy availability and relative affordability meant that premaritally pregnant women virtually always had a convenient alternative solution at hand. This availability of an alternative and the tendency of unmarried women to use ideal rather than real marriages as their point of reference made them especially ambivalent and insecure about their choice to keep the child.

This article has shown that low illegitimacy rates in Japan are reflective of normative constraints on childbearing. The positive correlation between the non-marital and overall fertility rates suggest that, if the Japanese state would like to boost national fertility, it might consider encouraging the growing numbers of single women in their thirties to give birth if they wish to do so, regardless of their marital status. To do this, the normative constraints on childbearing outside wedlock outlined here will have to be reduced and attempts made to make abortions less easily acceptable to the general public. Both would entail a fundamental shift in education and social policy, and in the Japanese state’s current vision of the nuclear family.

Could the Japanese experience in limiting illegitimacy be used, conversely, to inform policies in other countries? This article’s findings suggest that illegitimate births could be limited very successfully through modifying people’s beliefs about the effects that different family forms have on children. At the same time, the article has described some of the costs of achieving a low illegitimacy rate in a modern society. These included high abortion rates and women’s willingness to marry undesirable partners in order to legitimize their children. They also include lower overall fertility. A state aiming at achieving low illegitimacy rates might find it useful to evaluate this goal against its potential costs.

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Notes

1. All the personal names in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of my subjects. Unless otherwise specified, the women quoted are unwed mothers.

2. As the phrase 'lone unwed mother' sounds unwieldy I will use simply 'unwed mother' throughout the text. In this article I define unwed mothers as mothers who have never been legally married to the father of at least one of their children and who assumed the primary responsibility for the emotional and material well-being of their child(ren) due to the absence of a male partner.

3. In an international comparison of gender wage gaps Japan fares badly. According to a comparative study of twenty-two industrialized countries by Bradshaw and Finch (2002: 33), full-time employed women in Japan earn only 62 per cent of the income of full-time employed men. In this particular study only two other countries exhibit a larger gender wage gap: women earn only 61 per cent of what men do in Israel and 60 per cent in Austria. In all the other countries the ratio was between 72 per cent (Canada) and 90 per cent (Norway).

4. In the early 1990s the hourly wage of part-time female workers was 72 per cent of that of the full-time workers, and in 2003 it was only 62.3 per cent. Eighty per cent of temporary employees in Japan are females compared to about 60 per cent in the US and the UK (Osawa 2005: 9).

5. The average income of an unwed mother in 2003 was 2.33 million yen a year, only marginally lower than the 2.45 million yen a year average income of a divorced mother (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō 2003: 358). The Japan Institute of Labour lone mother income estimates are somewhat higher than those by the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare.

6. Divorced and widowed lone mothers can deduct up to 350,000 yen from their annual taxable income. Unwed mothers are ineligible for this exemption ([http://www.nta.go.jp/taxanswer/shotoku/1170.htm](http://www.nta.go.jp/taxanswer/shotoku/1170.htm), accessed 5 April 2008).

7. Of course many divorces may be happening against the will of a divorced mother to be. The wife was the petitioner in 69 per cent of all divorces brought to court in 2006 (Saikō Saibansho 2006: 34). These figures however have to be taken with caution as divorces that involve courts in Japan are a small minority. In 2000 mutual consent divorces made up 91.5 per cent of all divorces (Fuess 2004: 206). Unfortunately there are no data on the proportions of husbands and wives initiating divorces in mutual consent cases. Still, even if we assume that men are the primary decision-makers in half of all divorces of families with children, the numbers of cases in which women make the decision to become a divorced mother are growing much more rapidly than cases when women decide to have a child outside wedlock.

8. The only exception is Wright (2007), a qualitative study of Japanese unwed mothers. Differently from this article it looks at the consequences of women’s choices rather than the obstacles faced.

9. I mainly endeavoured to interview women with young children as this ensured that their recollections about pregnancy were recent ones. This meant, however, that it is difficult for me to speculate how much children might objectively suffer from their mother’s choice. At the time of my interviews, the fear of discrimination and suffering reported by the mothers seemed to be well above the objective reality of their children’s experiences as far as the mothers knew about them. Hardly anyone for example answered affirmatively to the question whether they thought their child had ever faced prejudice.

10. The number of full-time housewives has decreased in Japan from 74.9 per cent in 1955 to 62 per cent in 1970 and 46.6 per cent in 1995 (Sasagawa 2004: 183–4). For working-class women the salaryman/housewife model is often simply unrealistic (Roberts 1994)

11. For comparison: in the UK in 2003 men in households with children below 6 years old spent on average 0.9 hours a day on childcare (compared with 1.6 hour a day for full-time employed women) and 1.5 hours a day on other unpaid work (compared with 2.4 hours for full-time employed women) (OECD 2005: 201). In the US in 2005 an employed man on average spent
1.11 hours on household activities (compared to 2.1 hours for employed women) and 1.16 hours caring for the child(ren) (compared to 1.88 hours for employed women) (Bureau of Labour Statistics 2006).

12. As discussed above, the father is also seen as necessary, but his role is much less practical and can be successfully fulfilled in his absence.

13. In Japan abortion is legal until the twenty-second week of pregnancy and there are therefore unlikely to be many unwanted pregnancies carried to term simply because the women missed the abortion deadline. In my sample of sixty-eight women, there were only five such women. Three of them did not realize they were pregnant until it was too late and two did not have enough money to pay for the abortion.

14. According to the website of one of the clinics providing abortions, an abortion until the eleventh week of pregnancy typically costs between 70,000 and 150,000 yen (between £350 and £750), while starting from the thirteenth week an abortion costs between 200,000 and 300,000 (€1000–€1500) ([http://miyake-clinic.gr.jp/ippannsikkann/ippan23.htm](http://miyake-clinic.gr.jp/ippannsikkann/ippan23.htm), accessed 7 May 2007). The price may vary between different clinics, but these prices are very close to those given in Norgren (2001: 160), who also discusses the legal situation. In 2000 13.1 per cent of Japanese respondents thought abortion never justifiable compared to 25.3 per cent in the UK, 29.5 per cent in the US, 28.4 per cent in West Germany and 30.6 per cent in Italy in 1999 (The European Values Study Foundation and World Values Survey Association 1999–2004).

15. Reported abortion rates in Japan are not particularly high in comparison with those of other industrialized countries (Henshaw et al. 2001). Unfortunately international comparisons are not informative since Japanese abortion rates are notoriously underestimated. Frühstück (2003: 190) estimates that the real number of abortions in Japan is three to four times higher than the official one, which would mean that half of all the pregnancies in Japan end in abortion.

16. The only two families which saw an illegitimate child as preferable were those where parents were devoted Christian believers. According to Kasahara et al. (2001: 589), in post-war Japan Christians never exceeded 1 per cent of the population, so the above experience cannot be a dominant pattern.

17. Given the recent findings that Japanese women marrying after getting pregnant tend to end up with much less desirable partners than their non-pregnant counterparts (Raymo and Iwasawa 2007), more research is needed on the stability of such marriages and the effects of these suboptimal unions on children’s well-being.

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‘The worst abuse against a child’


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