Japan’s Evolving Family
Voices from Young Urban Adults Navigating Change

GLENDA S. ROBERTS

I would like to meet a beautiful woman whom I could marry.

I would also like a raise.

A man’s petition to the divine, left at Jindai Temple, Tokyo

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*Japan’s Evolving Family: Voices from Young Urban Adults Navigating Change*
Glenda S. Roberts

Cover photo © James E. Nickum
Ema [絵馬] “a votive wooden tablet... offered in prayer or in thanks for a prayer answered,”

Ema often include the wishes of men, women, and couples for their future. These tablets hang on racks and are open to the view of passersby. In this report, names and addresses of the people who wrote the ema have been erased in order to preserve their anonymity.
Summary

Japanese society of the 1980s appeared to be stable, thriving, even predictably so. Sociologist Ezra Vogel had declared it to be top ranked, recognizing Japan’s economic and technological prowess, quality in industrial output, and timeliness of logistics. Social scientists discussed the nuclear families that had become the norm in urban Japan, now populated by middle classes of “professional housewives” and “salarymen.” Young adults had only to look at the life insurance brochures to see illustrations of their expected life course, including a man’s taking his first job immediately upon graduation from school, his marriage (generally in one’s mid-20s), the timing of the two children (in one’s later 20s) and their educational trajectories, and retirement after the children’s college graduations. Part-time jobs were largely the domain of middle-aged married women, while full-time employment with benefits was the expectation for salaried male employees, and employers were known for doing anything possible to keep employees on the payroll even in an economic downturn. If we fast-forward to the 2000s, however, we see a different landscape in the economy, and a different calculus emerging in the family as well. It is this new calculus of the family that we seek to elucidate in this report.

Since the economic bubble burst in 1991, Japan has become a rapidly aging, low-birthrate society. Late marriage and no marriage have also become commonplace. With the prolonged recession, stable employment declined, wages dropped, and the prototypical “salaryman” of the postwar period took a beating in his reputation. Given this milieu, this report seeks to explore how young adults feel about conventional gender roles, whether and how attitudes changed in regard to marriage and childrearing, how the unmarried envision themselves in the future, and how the married wish to raise their children. Young adults from the Tokyo metropolitan area discuss herein how they asses the trends and what they want out of life in regard to three areas: (1) the stereotype of the salaryman and the notion of the good husband; (2) cohabitation, unwed motherhood, “shotgun weddings,” and abortion; and (3) having a child and raising a child, and the social environment for childrearing. The data from this work come from a qualitative survey of eight men and eight women ages 23–39, all living in greater metropolitan Tokyo.

My interviewees held fairly conservative views on gender roles in marriage and on what it takes to be a parent. Both women and men were skeptical of the possibilities for “balance” in work and life, as they both tend to see men as the primary breadwinners. Since employers often discriminate against women workers, and because of the lack of sufficient daycare and after-school care for children—and also because of job mismatches, by default or by choice—most women may end up as homemakers or secondary earners. Yet there were also more liberal views from those who were enacting or who desired more equal sharing in marriage and employment.

The influence of the recessionary economy appeared often as a backdrop, especially to the men’s thoughts on having and raising children. Differences in social class also shape the options available to parents for their children and their childrens’ outcomes. Only two in my sample had both high-school educations and blue-collar employment, but the one who was self-employed in particular had less financial security and held quite different views on the kinds of support needed from public policy than did more well-educated, white-collar interviewees.
Future research should look more closely at working-class people’s attitudes and strategies in marriage and childrearing.

I found that views relating to childbearing and rearing remain quite conventional. All the interviewees expected that should they marry, they would have children, preferably after waiting a couple of years in order to enjoy life as a couple together. In this area, values about the ideal family do not seem to have changed much. Most of my interviewees thought that it takes two parents to raise a child. They felt that children are very expensive and that people had to get their “ducks in a row” before having children in order to provide sufficiently for them, including extracurricular activities and a university education. Furthermore, social expectations that women should be solely responsible for the “double shift” of household labor and caregiving upon marriage, as well as continued discrimination against women in the workplace and a workplace culture of long hours, appear to underlie the hesitancy young adults have in acting on their dreams of family formation in the recessionary economy. Some women, too, fear that their future in-laws or relatives may place onerous demands on them once they become brides. In addition, for some, the gap in norms between what men and what women want from marriage might be preventing them from tying the knot. Some women want their own careers to be taken seriously by partners, and eschew taking on the lion’s share of childrearing and household management. Most men interviewed, for their part, want their wives to work—a departure from decades earlier—but they do not want them to be primary earners, and they hope they will do the majority of childcare and housework, although they themselves expect to contribute. This is also borne out by statistics.

Furthermore, if one knows that children will be costly, yet one also knows that having a child risks a woman’s employment status, then the decision to marry and have a child may well be delayed. It is difficult to be “ready” for marriage when the larger social environment to support families—such as stable and well-paying employment, childcare, and a corporate culture that supports working families—is inadequate. In the report, I use the concept of “readiness” to explain young people’s hesitancy to leap into family formation under conditions of uncertainty. Both women and men were skeptical of the possibilities for balance in work and life, as they both tend to see men as the primary breadwinners.

These young adults’ narratives indicate that the institution of marriage remains robust, but structural factors such as the workplace and support for childcare, as well as job instability (including discrimination against married women) cause people to hesitate. Because it takes so much care—the bar is so high—to raise a child, people refrain from marrying.

Given the challenges of marriage and childrearing, might women feel compelled to rebel against tradition and create new ways to organize families? For example, is the number of unwed mothers growing in Japan as it is in similar societies? The answer is largely “no.” The big difference between Japan and most other advanced industrial societies is that in Japan, marriage and childbearing still largely go hand in hand. That is, my interviewees felt that having a child out of wedlock was not a sound option for family formation, but a pitiable one. They felt that social stigma against such children lingers, and that single mothers would not be able to provide sufficiently for these children, resulting in unhappiness and a difficult life. Although the stigma against bearing a child out of wedlock may diminish in Japan’s future, I found no evidence for it in my discussions with these young adults. Most felt that abortion was a justifiable if
unfortunate choice when marriage was not an option. On the other hand, the interviewees’ views on cohabitation were more relaxed than in previous generations—most felt that the practice was nothing remarkable, that it was indeed pragmatic as it gives one the opportunity to see a partner’s values close-up before actually entering the family register, and that it is a cost-saving measure in expensive urban areas. At the same time, some did mention that were they to cohabit, they would not tell their parents. And, in regard to “shotgun marriage,” most of my interviewees had experience of it themselves or knew of those who had. Most saw it as commonplace in today’s Japan, and they approved of it as long as it was between mature adults who understood the difficulties of childrearing and were willing to undertake them responsibily.

Another interesting finding suggests that living as a single in itself disposes a person to hesitate sharing space with a partner. As more and more people delay marriage, the number who will always remain single is growing. This group will no doubt have an effect in the future on people’s views of the viability and desirability of life without marriage.

While it may take more effort as well as luck to be “ready” in today’s economy, my interviewees are actively engaging with life and assessing their options carefully as they go. They confront a number of formidable obstacles, themselves often legacies of the glorified past, such as long hours at work for salaried employees in regular employment, widespread insecurity and low wages in ever-increasing irregular employment, and workplace discrimination against married women with families. Insufficient provision of childcare in urban areas is another big area of concern for them. If these problems can be addressed adequately by policymakers, then Japan may well see a reversal of the trend toward later marriage, less marriage, and a low birthrate.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1

Women and Labor Force Participation ........................................................................ 4

The Stereotype of the Salaryman .................................................................................. 6
  The Good Husband: Unmarried Men ........................................................................ 11
  The Good Husband: Married Men ........................................................................... 14

Women and the Stereotype of the Salaryman ............................................................. 18
  Economic Mainstay of the Household .................................................................... 18
  Men and Domestic Work ......................................................................................... 19
  Communication and Cooperation ............................................................................. 19
  Equal Partnership vs. Companion .......................................................................... 20

Envisioning the Family: Readiness ............................................................................ 26
  Men’s Readiness ...................................................................................................... 26
  Women’s Readiness ................................................................................................. 28
  Marriage as an Exit Strategy for Women ................................................................. 31
  Cohabitation ............................................................................................................ 33
  “Shotgun” Marriage and Extramarital Childbirth ................................................... 35
  Unwed Mothers and Abortion .................................................................................. 36
  The Family of My Dreams ..................................................................................... 41
  Legacy Expectations? .............................................................................................. 46

Balancing Work and Life: Obstructed at Every Turn (Happō Fusagari) ................. 47

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 50

More on the Project .................................................................................................... 55
  Profiles of Interviewees .......................................................................................... 55
  Related Work on the Family in East Asia ................................................................. 57

Endnotes ....................................................................................................................... 59

References ................................................................................................................... 64

Acknowledgments ....................................................................................................... 70

About the Author ......................................................................................................... 71
Japan’s Evolving Family: Voices from Young Urban Adults Navigating Change

Introduction

“Let us recall that the model of a proper family used to include a clearly defined temporal sequence: “love—marriage—baby carriage”; first the meeting of hearts, then the union certified by the registry office and/or church, then, as the culmination of love, children. That was the norm, and most people more or less approximated to it—on pain of massive sanctions.”

—From “Families in a Runaway World”

As in the West, Japan has experienced some major sociocultural shifts in recent decades. Of course, change is perhaps nothing to be remarked on; the stasis of the postwar period, where people came to think of themselves as a so-called “all middle-mass society,” might have been the exception. In any case, many trends that emerged following the Bubble Economy of the late 1980s have made social scientists take note: the recessionary economy and concomitant “lost decades,” during which young people have faced difficulties finding employment and some salaried employees have found themselves restructured out of their lifetime employment; the steep rise in women’s educational attainment; globalized notions of gender equality and legal frameworks to facilitate it; delayed marriage and less marriage; a low birthrate and rapid demographic decline; and economic inequality in society. All of these trends have consequences for the population, for how people evaluate their lives, their options, and their opportunities. Yet have these trends affected the ways in which people in Japan think of families?

If we take a step back, we might ask, “What is the family, anyway?” In the West, the notion of a “proper” family following a “proper” sequence has now given way to a proliferation of family models. While some still follow the conventional sequence, others follow new trajectories, or different models altogether. What enables this, in part, is the loosening of those “massive sanctions.” In other words, legal structures in many countries now embrace diversity and take the individual as their referent, as do social welfare structures. We now have, they suggest, “postfamilial family constellations.”

Japan is not the West, obviously, but in the postwar period the influences of the West have been strong. By the 1970s, the notion of the “perfectly Japanese” nuclear family had become a strong normative model. This family ideal consisted of a breadwinning “salaryman” and his “professional housewife,” who would ensure that the children were well-educated and the elders taken care of. Despite the ideal, scholars have pointed out that a great deal of slippage exists
between the official family norm and on-the-ground practices, where people make do as best they can in their complicated lives. Globalized notions of gender equality, rising incomes, as well as foreign pressure to ratify the Equal Opportunity Employment Law (1986) eventually set the stage for huge gains in women’s educational attainment and increases in women’s participation in paid employment. In addition, more recently, globalization and deregulation have led to increasing levels of economic uncertainty and social inequality, thus further impacting notions of the ideal family.

What do these trends—changes in gender norms, a recessionary economy, instability in the labor market—mean for the life plans of real-life men and women? Have Japanese people given up on the notion of marrying and having children? Does the notion of marriage carry less importance than it once did? For example, will we see young people increasingly forming casual unions and bearing children outside of marriage, as many young people in Western countries do today? Should we expect increases in other practices, such as cohabitation, as harbingers of a loosening of norms surrounding marriage? Perhaps the economic doldrums will make people reconsider forming unions and having children, or perhaps they will form unions but choose not to have children.

As a qualitative pilot study embedded within a large quantitative study on innovative behaviors in East Asian society, conducted by the East-West Center (see box on p. 8), four major areas of attitudinal change in Japan were examined. The goal was to probe each individual’s views to see how much or how little they hewed to the conservative societal positions of the postwar, high-growth period, as well as to understand the context in which individuals formed their opinions in an era that has seen substantial social and economic change. The four main areas queried were: (1) the stereotype of the salaryman and the notion of the “good husband,” (2) cohabitation, unwed motherhood, “shotgun weddings” and abortion, (3) having and raising a child, and (4) the changing labor market.

The issues interviewees brought up and the ways in which they grappled with the issues very much reflect the times, providing a range of perspectives on relationships, family, and work in the 2000s. The quantitative study found large attitudinal differences by gender, with women being less “traditional.” But quantitative analysis alone fails to show how people narrate social change, how they feel about their own experience, the nature of their aspirations for their own lives, and how this relates to their personal contexts. Here, in-depth interviews with 8 men and 8 women between the ages of 23 and 39 highlight individuals’ reactions and responses to the times in which they live.

Much research in recent years has pointed to a gap in thinking between men and women in Japan. While men are said to be more influenced by a “salaryman masculinity” that is based on a heterosexual marriage with strictly defined male breadwinner and female homemaker/childrearing roles, women want something else—more of a companionate and communicative marriage, where roles are less sharply delineated and partners appreciate and thank each other for their efforts.

In the stereotypic model, marriage, a symbol of social adulthood, was expected to take place before age 25 for women. Women left employment at marriage, or at least by the birth of their first child, only to reenter employment in a part-time capacity when the children reached school age. The married couple grew apart emotionally as each concentrated on his or her own area—for the husband, the firm, which exacted long hours of work from him as breadwinner; for the wife, the home and the domestic work, and the children’s educations. Filial piety was part of the stereotype insofar as the husband, if an eldest son, was expected to co-reside with, or at least
care for, his parents in their old age. The couple was said to become increasingly less couple-centered and more child-centered as years went by. By the time the salaryman retired, the couple might be emotionally alienated and the breadwinner might barely know his children, but he had a house, his wife was deeply entrenched in her neighborhood networks, and the children had been educated, employed, and perhaps married off.

One should note here that this model of male breadwinner and professional housewife became less and less viable over the latter years of the twentieth century for several reasons. A major driver has been the economic recession that began in 1991, from which the economy has yet to see a strong recovery. Globalization, too, has encouraged changing attitudes toward gender equality and gender roles in society, influencing people’s perceptions of “what makes life worth living,” as anthropologist Gordon Mathews has found in his qualitative studies. It has also influenced policy change in employment, moving toward more neoliberal trends of deregulating employment, and bringing resulting increases in the proportion of irregular workers with precarious employment in the labor force. The legal framework for gender equality for women has been increasingly strengthened over the decades since the passage of the Equal Opportunity Employment Law of 1986. Women’s opportunities in the workplace have increased, and women’s educational attainment has risen. But at the same time, there is a gap between those women who have gained and those who have lost over this time period, a gap dubbed *jojo kakusa* by economists. That is, while some women with excellent qualifications are getting their foot in the door of career-track employment in Japan’s internal labor market, others, with fewer or less illustrious qualifications, are increasingly left in irregular employment, which offers much lower wages and fewer, if any, benefits. The share of irregular employment in overall employment for both women and men has increased greatly in the past decade, as Figure 1 indicates:

**Figure 1. Increasing job insecurity of Japanese workers**

The share of irregular employment for men and women continues to rise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One consequence of this casualization of labor for many young adults is that after they finish their final year of schooling, their entry into marriage is delayed. This is especially the case for men, as the following graph indicates:

**Figure 2. Trends in mean age at first marriage**

For both women and men, age thirty has become the new normal for matrimony.

![Graph showing trends in mean age at first marriage](https://example.com/graph.png)


As the interviewee narratives in this study convey, cultural norms surrounding the male breadwinner contribute greatly to the low rate of marriage for men in irregular employment. Other trends that are important to note before moving to the interview data are changes in women’s labor force participation rate, trends toward ever-later ages at first marriage, and less marriage.

**Women and Labor Force Participation**

Although the rate of women’s participation in paid employment has increased over the postwar period to the current rate of 48.2 percent overall, women in Japan still tend to follow a life course that includes a break in employment when they marry and have children. The resulting pattern is called the “M” curve. The most important things to note about this curve are: (1) the first peak of the “M” has shifted to the right as women delay marriage; (2) the trough in the “M” is less deep in recent years, as fewer women quit at marriage or childbirth; and (3) some 60 percent of women still leave employment at childbirth in Japan today, despite legal frameworks that provide for paid maternity leave and childcare leave. Sociologist Pamela Stone has analyzed the dilemmas of women in the United States who get shut out of careers because of “little changing gendered realities,” but one could argue that exiting a good job carries an even greater weight in Japan because of the inflexibility of the internal labor market—once you’re out, it is very difficult to opt back in. Hence, at the second peak of the “M,” women are generally working as *irregular*
employees at low-waged jobs, whether part-time, contract, or full-time, with few if any benefits. In fact, many married women during this period of their lives try to conform to the government’s tax laws, which discourage them from working full-time in order to avoid paying income tax and to continue receiving spousal benefits from their husband’s firm. But even if women desire regular, full-time employment when they return to the workforce, it is not easily obtained because of the internal labor market, as explained below.

Figure 3. Age-specific labor force participation rates for women

Women quit work at marriage and childbirth, and of those who do eventually return to work, fewer and fewer are returning to full-time employment. This phenomenon is represented here by what is known as a “fading M curve.”

A few factors distinguish Japan’s employment system from those of some East Asian neighbors, as well as from those of many other wealthy economies globally. First, its labor market is internal. That is, generally speaking, graduates are hired en masse immediately upon finishing their final year of schooling, whether junior high, high school, technical school, university, or graduate school, and they proceed in cohorts up through an internal career ladder until retirement. There is little job-hopping after the first several years of employment, because job-hopping does not advance one’s salary or career prospects. Although mid-career hiring without penalty to the employee does take place on occasion, and while it is common in foreign-capital firms, it is much less common in Japanese firms. In this internal labor market, wages for regular employees are usually based on age and seniority, as well as including an achievement component. Regular employees are trained in-house as generalists. With the rapid growth in irregular employment over the past two decades—in 2009, irregular workers made up over a third of total employees—labor economist Yashiro Naohiro notes that a “wall” has arisen between insiders and outsiders in Japanese firms. Firms only occasionally offer workers mobility into regular positions from irregular ones.
Finally, many scholars report that the toll of long working hours, especially for white-collar regular employees, is high.19

In looking at how these characteristics affect young people, two issues come up repeatedly. First is that the labor market penalizes those who do not obtain regular employment upon leaving school, making it difficult for them to join a younger cohort being hired in the following intake year. Next is that the system penalizes those who drop out and re-enter, or those who wish to segue from regular to irregular work and back, whether men or women. Women, given their propensity in Japan to exit and then reenter the workforce for childbearing and rearing, end up paying large opportunity costs for this behavior.20 Finally, the expectations of long working hours for salarymen also affect salarywomen, which influences their decisions to marry, as well as whether to quit or remain at work if married.

More than twenty years of economic stagnation have brought instability to households and uncertainty about what the future holds.21 Japanese young adults are marrying later, and a sizeable minority will end up not marrying at all, as can be seen in the following graph:

Figure 4. Trends in proportion of those never married at age 50

From “marriage as a must” to “marriage as a maybe.”


At this juncture in Japanese social life, it is interesting to take stock of how both unmarried and married young adults envision and enact their futures in regard to relationship formation, marriage, and childbearing and rearing.

The Stereotype of the Salaryman

While an icon during the high-growth period of the 1960s and early 1970s, the salaryman was dealt a strong blow when the economic bubble burst in 1991. In the aftermath, many jobs were
restructured or eliminated, including elite jobs that had been considered rock-solid. The loss of formerly stable jobs led people to question the future of the “Japanese employment system.”

Scholars in the ensuing years since the bubble burst have questioned the extent to which the salaryman model and breadwinner masculinity have persisted, given the economic doldrums and the rise of instability in employment. Alternatives, such as “herbivore men” who eschew marriage and the breadwinner mentality, or “ikumen” men who are said to put a substantial amount of time into childrearing and domestic work, have been the subject of popular media as well as scholarly inquiry. While the latter phenomena are certainly worthy of note, they are far from being the majority. More than twenty years after the age of prosperity had ended, I wanted to know what my informants thought of the stereotype of the salaryman. Let us now turn to their responses.

Most of the eight male informants noted that the stereotypical image of the breadwinner/professional housewife household used to be, by and large, true of past generations, although there were variations, especially depending on the sort of work that the man did. For instance, Mr. Nagamune (34), who had an upper-middle-class upbringing with parents who were salaried employees and later in politics, noted that his own parents did not conform to this stereotype. Mr. Murai (31), from a dual-career family where both parents were university graduates and working in high-ranking positions in firms, also noted that his background diverged from the stereotype. Mr. Tachibana (39) was a working-class man whose parents were self-employed in a construction business, although his mother was much more involved after she became widowed. When Mr. Sudo (36) was growing up, his father, who had been employed by a firm that went bankrupt, joined the Self-Defense Forces, but later quit to become an ambulance driver for the city (as a public servant). His mother, who worked in banking before her marriage, returned to that field after childrearing and worked as a regular employee, not a part-timer as most married women did. Mr. Kondo’s (23) parents were separated, and he was raised by his grandparents in the countryside. He described them as being very traditional.

Although this sample of men did not necessarily grow up in breadwinner/professional housewife households of the stereotype, they all agreed that the stereotype exists, as they had seen some aspects of it in their own families or knew of families that conformed to the roles. Moreover, they told me that to some extent the stereotype still holds sway, though some features of it are no longer true. For instance, Mr. Sudo felt that older men and women fit the image we describe, but younger cohorts diverge. Especially in the bad economy, he felt that the number of men who wish their wives would work outside the home exceeds those who wish their wives would stay home. Mr. Tachibana was also of the opinion that it is fine for his wife to work, and that working reduces the stress of being stuck in the house (this resonates with my findings from earlier research on blue-collar women). Such reasoning is a way for working-class men to exhibit a generous approval of their wife’s employment, without admitting economic need, which would tarnish their own male pride. Mr. Kondo noted that the stereotype is not accurate. He himself wants to go home when work is over; he wants an emotionally warm, companionable relationship; and he professes not to mind doing housework or having a working wife. One must note, however, that Mr. Kondo is still single and has not experienced the work/life pressures of a married man with a family.

Mr. Nagamune remarked that among his friends, the stereotypic salaryman is a rarity. Most of his friends are in couples where both husband and wife work. He has few friends with professional Japanese young adults are marrying later, and a sizeable minority will end up not marrying at all.
DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF THE STUDY

All sixteen of the participants in the study were solicited through snowball sampling initiated by the author, a method whereby several personal networks of the author were utilized to contact possible candidates to be interviewed. No one in the sample was known to her in advance of the study. All members were between 23 and 39 years of age, with half in their 20s and half in their 30s. The sample was evenly divided by sex. There were four single men and four married men. All of the married men had children and were employed, while none of the single men had children and one of the single men was unemployed. Among the women, three were married, one was divorced, and four were single. Two of the women were in irregular employment. Although most of the interviewees worked and lived in greater Metropolitan Tokyo, many of them were born and raised in other prefectures, including Yamaguchi, Aichi, Saitama, Tochigi, Aomori, Ishikawa, Kyoto, and even abroad (Hong Kong).

Of the men, three held high-school diplomas, while four were university graduates, with one holding a master’s of science degree. Of the women, one was a high-school graduate, two had two-year technical degrees, and five had four-year university degrees. All of the married or divorced participants had at least one child. Income levels were varied: no income (1), less than $10,000 per year (1), less than $20,000 per year (3), less than $50,000 per year (7), less than $70,000 (2), less than $100,000 per year (1), and over $100,000 per year (1).

Figure 5. Income range of interviewees in the study

Source: Author, income distribution of the interviewees.
wives who are professional housewives. And, he notes, most couples now live apart from their parents, in nuclear households, so the husband does not have a particularly strong tie with his parents. He had never intended to partner with, nor did he marry, someone who would be a professional housewife. He thought women would be happier if they worked as well. He noted that housewives can easily get stressed out, and their world is somewhat narrow and limited. He did not like the notion of someone waiting for him to come home and making a big fuss over things. To Mr. Nagamune, it is better for each spouse to have his or her own free time, and for each to feel good about that.

Mr. Nomura (32), unmarried, thought that most Japanese people hold the same image of the salaryman as described in the stereotype, but that reality is changing. He noted that he had heard from the media of cases where the wife works and the husband takes care of the home. He, however, knows no househusbands. He attributes the changing of norms to the economy: “Ever since the economic downturn, people have had trouble getting by on the husband’s income alone, so there are many couples where both partners work full-time. But when you say ‘full-time,’ the household work becomes a big issue, so one will be a part-timer for half of the day. I think usually men are still the ones who have their jobs as their main thing.” Mr. Murai notes that when he was small, the Bubble Economy kept firms flush with cash. Executives had expense accounts to regularly take clients and subordinates out for late-night drinking and entertainment. His father, and the men around him, had this lifestyle. “Going out drinking was seen as a part of work, so coming home late was seen as a part of work.” With the end of the Bubble Economy, he noted, wives who used to not work outside the home started entering the workplace. With the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008, whose impact on Japan’s financial markets was termed the Lehman Shock, “it became all a guy could do just to support the family.” He notes that in the old days, men who said they were working late were actually out drinking, but nowadays they are working.

All participants were asked about all four topics. Semi-structured interviews ranged from one hour to two hours in length, and took place in Tokyo at the author’s home, the author’s office, the informant’s workplace (in the case of one self-employed man in Kyoto), or a restaurant. All of the names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While a varied sample was sought for this study, there is, of course, a lot more variation among young urban adults than is captured from these sixteen individuals. For instance, none of the sample is from the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) population; all professed heterosexual orientations. How the LGBTQ population envisions and enacts “the family,” and what their opinions would be on the topics explored in this research, would certainly be of interest and a useful addition in further research.
Mr. Isehara (38), a high-school graduate employed at a large printing firm in a regular position, was the informant who most strongly asserted that the stereotype is accurate, but he was referring mostly to the long hours of overtime required in the salaryman’s job, something that he experienced on a daily basis. He had very little flexibility in his own job, which was characterized by a regular day at the factory, often followed by hours of dealing with clients outside the firm. He noted that he leaves home at 6:30 am during the workweek and usually does not return until 10 or 11 pm. His workday ends at 7:30 pm, so if there are no clients to deal with, he leaves immediately in order to see his children, who go to bed by 9 pm. Sometimes he even takes the expressway [toll road] home, in order to make it there before they fall asleep.

He noted, too, that he deviates from the stereotype in the sense that although he is the second son, his elder brother has married a woman who is an only child. They have decided that in the future, he may take care of their parents and have them live with him, while his brother assumes care for his sister-in-law’s parents. He thinks living together with his parents, in any case, would be a good thing to do. In addition, if his wife’s parents became ill first and needed assistance, he wouldn’t mind having them live with him and his wife. They both get along well with each other’s parents, and the elders on both sides give them help with childcare. His story provides evidence of a loosening of the strict rules of obligation, as well as strict rules of patriline, such as the “eldest son must care for his parents” or “a woman’s obligation to her natal family ends at marriage.” However, the desire to care for the elders remains strong. There is evidence for this in the extant literature as well.30

Finally, Mr. Isehara also claimed that he doesn’t know any stereotypic salarymen, and that most of the men he knows do more around the house than he does. His own father did not do much housework and was a terrible cook, though the family did shop together. Because he saw how little his dad assisted when he was growing up, he was inspired to do a bit more himself, he said.

All in all, these eight responses show that the salaryman stereotype was never accurate for all men, and was dependent on one’s type of employment and the wife’s employment. The interviewees did note that, all in all, men are doing more housework than formerly. Some also make efforts to be with their children whenever they can. Furthermore, they noted the effects of the poor economy on men’s behavior and attitudes: men don’t drink much at night as they can’t afford to, and they want their wives to work because money is tight.

The question of men’s level of participation in domestic labor has been studied extensively through quantitative data.31 Data from national family surveys from 1994–2009 found that men’s share of total time spent doing housework has indeed increased, from 2.3 to 3.4 hours per week. In addition, the percentage of men doing no housework dropped from about 42 percent in 1994 to 22 percent in 2009.32 Even this small contribution, Noriko Tsuya notes, is an indicator that most men have crossed the “symbolic gender barrier associated with doing any housework at all.”33 Yet if we look at men’s household participation in other wealthy countries, Japanese men’s participation seems minimal, as Figure 6 indicates.

We should keep in mind, too, that Japanese households do not have access to hiring foreign domestic workers or even teenaged babysitters or au pairs—as is the case in much of Europe, North America, and Asia—nor is it easy or generally affordable to hire local workers for household jobs. Hence, the person doing the work that a husband does not do will be his wife or other relatives, such as mother or mother-in-law.
THE GOOD HUSBAND: UNMARRIED MEN

As mentioned above, men’s participation in housework and childcare has increased modestly in recent years, and men’s and women’s expectations of how a husband should comport himself are also changing to an extent. In particular, it is said that women seek men who are comfortable (economically), communicative, and cooperative (who will help around the house without being asked). In this research, men were asked about their notions of a “good husband,” and how they saw themselves in relation to it.

To analyze responses about the good husband idea, interviewees were grouped by marital status. First, the unmarried men in the sample consisted of the following: Mr. Nomura (32), Mr. Murai (31), Mr. Kondo (23), and Mr. Morita (38). Mr. Nomura, a college graduate, is a salaryman at a small firm. Mr. Murai, who also holds a bachelor of arts degree, is a self-employed restaurateur. Mr. Kondo, a high-school graduate, works for the government in the defense sector. Finally, Mr. Morita, a university graduate who has held many jobs, mostly in the private education field, is currently unemployed.

All of the unmarried men professed that they would one day like to marry, although only one of them (Mr. Murai) was dating or in a relationship at the time of the interview.


Figure 6. Hours spent per day on childcare and housework among husbands with children under age six for selected countries

Japanese men’s participation in the household is low in international comparison.
Like Mr. Murai, Mr. Nomura strongly expected that his wife would work, although he wanted her to stay home when the children were small. In addition, he did not want her work to be full-time or central to her life. He seemed to be a man who, given his own modest salary, recognized the necessity of having an employed wife in order to sustain a middle-class household. Although Mr. Nomura had regular and stable employment in a well-established company, it was a small firm with seniority-based wages. He could not expect much income growth with this company. By projecting his future income-generating capacity, Mr. Nomura knew it would not be sufficient to support a family in today’s economy, even if he gets promoted and despite being a university graduate. He noted that in his company, all the married men have working wives, even the section chief (whose salary is expected to be higher): “None of them can have a wife stay home on our salaries.” He noted that this means most men are weaker in relation to their wives, implying that women’s employment brings them more power in the household. While his salary is modest, he does have shorter hours than many salaried men his age, due to the nature of his firm’s product: he starts work at 9 am and finishes by 6:30 pm, so is able to return home by 7:30 or 8 pm. While Mr. Nomura might be expected to participate in the household given his hours, the impression he left was that he neither hoped nor anticipated to equally share tasks after he marries. He noted that if he marries, he wants to keep things as they are. He would be willing to pick up a small amount of housework, but his wife, as a part-timer, would do more of it. As to chores, he declared that he can’t cook, but he is willing to do the laundry, is adept at gardening, and can try to do tasks that can be handled with machines. At present, Mr. Nomura lives with his parents, who, he notes, communicate well with each other, so he does not anticipate any trouble with communication.

In terms of the relationship with a future wife, Mr. Nomura mentioned that he wishes to have a warm and communicative relationship, one with more equality than that of typical Shōwa era couples, where the husband leads and the wife follows. He noted that mutual respect is important in a marriage. He does not want to be bossy. He noted wistfully that he hoped his wife would share his enthusiasm for trains, though perhaps that is too much to expect. And, although he will leave the decision to his wife, he would like to live near his parents, who are now in their 70s and a bit frail. Here, the filial piety norm for oldest sons is well intact, although modified—he does not expect to live with his parents, only next door, and even that seems to be a tentative desire, as his narrative indicated uncertainty as to how much he could ask his wife to accept.

Mr. Murai, who co-owns and runs a restaurant/bar in a chic Tokyo neighborhood, noted that he would like to have a wife who is working, not a housewife. He said, “In the end, whether you’re a man or a woman, I think you have dreams and so on. I’d like to be the kind of husband who can support (a wife’s) dream.” Like Mr. Nomura, he wanted a communicative relationship: “It wouldn’t be just ‘Food!’ ‘Bath!’ ‘Bedtime!’” (as in the typical salaryman portrait). Mr. Murai is currently in a serious relationship with a 21-year-old university student. He related that she had told him that, when she graduates, she wants a stable job with a large firm in order to hedge against his own career as an entrepreneur. He seemed happy with that prospect, although he also plans to work hard in his self-employment and obtain a comfortable livelihood.

While he himself is not a salaryman, Mr. Murai said that 60–70 percent of the men he knows fit the stereotype. He remarked that salaried employees resemble the stereotype, but self-employed men are much more involved with their households because they can make their own schedules. This comment about self-employed men having more leeway to engage in housework is apt. It is echoed in Mr. Tachibana’s experience, which is noted below. The argument is not that self-
employed men are always more participative, but that self-employment gives them discretion over their schedules if they desire to contribute more. When men are employed in firms, the corporate culture shapes their participation at home, as shall be seen later.

As for housework, Mr. Murai is currently sharing a room with another fellow, and he himself does a lot of the housework, laundry, and dishwashing. He says that if he was married, he would not leave the housework solely for his wife.

Mr. Kondo, at 23, is the youngest participant interviewed. He lived in a men’s dorm of his employer at the time of the interview. As his parents separated when he was small, Mr. Kondo grew up in his grandparents’ house and, as he notes, was strongly influenced by their conservative views. Perhaps due to this influence, as well as to his lack of education beyond high school and his lack of experience with dating, he appeared to be naïve in regard to relationships with women. The salaryman stereotype would not be accurate for him, he noted. Mr. Kondo would go home immediately after work, without drinking. He wanted a warm relationship with his spouse, and he hoped to be a gentle partner with a sense of humor who would help his wife and children fulfill their dreams. While he did not care whether or not his spouse worked, he wanted her to avoid night work so that the family would be able to enjoy a warm family life. He would not mind doing housework, he declared. Throughout the interview, he used the work “protect” to indicate a man’s responsibility in relation to women: a man should protect his girlfriend and protect his wife, as well as protect the household and the whole family. His frequent use of “protect” and “protection” reminds me of Nicholas Townsend’s work on American male masculinity and the “package deal,” where he found protection to be an important part of masculinity.36

Last among the unmarried men, Mr. Morita, a cram-school teacher, is the only one in this data set living on his own. He noted that it is understandable that stereotypes of the salaryman persist because they are fairly accurate. However, as others have pointed out, the stereotype has variations. In his case, his father was not the eldest son yet took care of his grandfather until he died. Other aspects of the stereotype, however, conform pretty closely to the script: his father worked long hours and was unable to express his affection or thanks to his wife (and Mr. Morita noted ruefully that he himself would likely be the same way). Mr. Morita’s mother was a full-time homemaker, who, as in the stereotype, managed the money in the family. Mr. Morita himself would like to marry someone who will work part-time, to supplement his low income, but he would not want her to work until the children were in elementary school. Furthermore, he would like her to be a good money manager and do the household accounts because this is not his strong suit. He also noted that he hopes to find someone who would share her worries and her joys with him. Unlike his father, he likes to cook, and claimed that if he marries, he will share everything except ironing, which he is not good at doing. He does know men who actively participate in the household after working all day, but he remarked that he doesn’t know where they get their energy. He also told me he knows of a couple where both husband and wife work full-time, but the husband does very little in the household, the wife does not spend much time on meals for the husband after she has fed the child,37 and their house is undoubtedly not very clean, yet they cannot afford outside help. His knowledge of this couple may well color his own desire not to have a wife who works while the children are young.

How filial is Mr. Morita? He had a difficult upbringing with parents who restricted their children’s activities in many ways, to the extent that even now he seemed haunted by this. Nevertheless, between him and his sister, he is the one who has maintained contact with his
parents, while his sister has completely severed the relationship. Although it did not sound like Mr. Morita has much affection for his parents, he feels he has a duty to stay in touch with them, perhaps like his own father did with his father before him. One might also suspect that, being currently unemployed after having lost his most recent job at a cram school, and without strong career prospects, Mr. Morita might have to rely in the future on his parents’ assets.

Mr. Morita pointed out that older men’s values were less differentiated from those of his generation, and their choices of life paths were more narrow. For his own generation, he thought the salaryman stereotype is about 80 percent accurate. I believe he was referring to values surrounding gender roles in marriage. For life paths, he may have been thinking of the path that many of his generation take in not marrying or not going into regular employment. I shall take up the latter theme later in the report.

THE GOOD HUSBAND: MARRIED MEN

What makes a “good husband”? Most portraits of husbands in the postwar era lead one to believe that separate gendered spheres were the norm, and that husbands were not expected to be “family men,” except in their most important role of economic provider. They could be workaholics, dragging in on the last train home, golfing on the weekend or sleeping it away—or drinking it away—but they did not need to be soul mates or lovers to their wives, or hands-on fathers to their children. Foremost they needed to be dedicated to their work. The postwar period saw marriages change increasingly from largely arranged matches to “love” matches. Today, overwhelmingly, marriages are not “arranged,” yet emotions are not the only factor involved either. Pragmatic criteria and social class homogeneity also guide most matches. As mentioned earlier, research indicates that women today desire husbands who are not simply breadwinners, but are also emotionally sensitive, participative, and communicative. I wondered what my sample of men saw as the “good” husband.

The four married men in the sample are Mr. Tachibana (39) and Mr. Isehara (38), both of whom work in blue-collar jobs, with Mr. Tachibana self-employed and Mr. Isehara working as a salaried employee at a large, well-known company. Also in the group are Mr. Sudo (36) and Mr. Nagamune (34), the former a research engineer with an advanced degree and the latter a university-educated secretary to a politician. In terms of social class, both Mr. Tachibana and Mr. Isehara are working-class men, although Mr. Isehara’s income is far above that of Mr. Tachibana because he works for a large and well-established firm, and his wife is also employed full-time in the public servant role of day-care teacher. Mr. Tachibana’s wife is a part-timer at the school cafeteria. Mrs. Sudo works at the same research center as her husband as a regular employee, while Mrs. Nagamune, a four-year college graduate, has a regular job at a foreign firm. All of the married men have at least one child.

I met Mr. Tachibana at his garage in the outskirts of Kyoto. Of the male participants, he was among the most eloquent and insightful. He probably does the most around the house of the married men in the sample. He does it all: cooking, laundry, and cleaning. Having married young at age 21, it seems as if he learned much about marriage through trial and error. Unlike the salaryman stereotype, he participated a lot in childrearing. He noted that because they married young, neither he nor his wife knew much. His wife was overwhelmed and struggled with “childrearing neurosis.” It seemed as if she was growing despondent, so he began to help out a lot. In the end,
he related, he became the primary parent. He bathed the children and put them to bed, and if they cried at night, he gave them a bottle and changed their diapers. All this help is also a kind of strategy on his part to gain personal time: He remarked that he now makes efforts in his marriage so that his wife won’t complain, and so that she does not mind if he goes out for some fun. He often counsels young men on marriage, and noted that his young protégées only see him having fun, they don’t see him doing housework! The young men he knows think that bringing home a paycheck will be enough, but nowadays most women want things to be done together, he noted. He said he often hears young couples quarreling over this issue. He attributes women’s power in the household to their increasing economic power, as they are “pretty close to pillars of the household.” His own wife is a part-timer at the local school cafeteria.

Mr. Isehara, the high-school-educated printing factory worker, is somewhat participative in the household, given his heavy work schedule. He loads the dishwasher on a regular basis, sometimes vacuums, shops with his wife on the weekend, and cooks on the days when she is working and he has charge of the children (as a full-time daycare teacher, his wife sometimes has to work on Saturdays). He also loves to cook the Chinese dish mapo doufu for her on their anniversary. The one chore he is not good at is laundry. He and his wife, unlike the salaryman stereotype, have good communication. Given his long hours on the job, the couple has arranged a way to communicate and connect on a daily basis. She falls asleep putting the children to bed, but he wakes her up when he comes home, and they do the laundry together, watching TV while they fold it. They talk about their children’s day, or whatever complaints each of them might have about their workplaces. On those weekends when neither of them has to work, they are just at home with the children, going shopping, or taking them to the park.

Another interesting feature of Mr. Isehara’s account was his admission that he deliberately made efforts to stop “playing around” when he married his wife. He said that before he married he was a womanizer (onnaguse ga warukatta), but he reformed this habit after he married. Furthermore, although he and his wife married due to her becoming pregnant, he really wanted to give her a wedding ceremony, even though she said she didn’t care about it. He noted that weddings are a once-in-a-lifetime event for women. Perhaps we can infer from this that he was quite in love with his wife, and he thought that a good husband should be sexually faithful.

In sum, one could sense through his interview that Mr. Isehara felt fulfilled in his marriage, that he enjoyed his family life, and that he made substantial efforts to get home from work as early as possible to spend time with the family. Not all the married men were like this, though; Mr. Sudo, below, shows us a lifestyle that is more typically conventional for white-collar men.

To Mr. Sudo, the research engineer, the good husband is one who would balance work and household duties with his wife; this was his ideal before he got married, and that he promised his soon-to-be wife he would follow. Moreover, he asked her to keep working after marriage, which she agreed to do. But after they actually married, while she kept her part of this bargain, he did not. The only household work he does is to put the children in the bath and shop for the groceries. He leaves the daily cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and other household management duties to his wife. He also admitted that he is not a very good communicator, noting that both of them get very tired from work. He does, however, play with the children on the weekends. As for expressing thanks and affection toward his wife, he laughed and said he wished he could be more like those Italian men in foreign films. He said that once in a while he will thank her for something, and she will say, “Oh! How rare!” In sum, although he seemed to think that a
good husband would give his wife more household support, communicate better, and be more affectionate, he was not up to it. Like the stereotype, he goes out drinking a couple times a week, comes home late, and does not go out with his wife as a couple. Although he did not tell me why his ideal of gender-equal sharing in marriage did not materialize, it may well have to do with their work schedules. He leaves home at 7:30 am and returns at 10 pm, while his wife leaves at 8:30 am and returns at 7 pm. Although the law in Japan is gender blind regarding the shortening of working hours for employees with young children, workplaces tend to allow mothers to make better use of this provision. For fathers, due to gendered expectations, it is discouraged. Still, though, when I asked him if his work hours prevented more household participation, he told me that lack of time was not the reason. He said, “Nah, I think I’m doing plenty as it is.” Although he deems this level of support more than sufficient, he noted that he does not think his wife is satisfied with the status quo. The attitude that men have the prerogative to take the “patriarchal dividend” was found in other studies as well. Moreover, Mr. Sudo’s longer hours at work could also be seen as a proof of masculinity. In Japan, “the long working hour norm” is a “critical element of organizational masculine practices.”

“It’s hard to imagine him doing anything more at home, but he says he’s happy with his current level of support. His wife, however, is not satisfied with the status quo. This ema apparently records the wish of a couple who, nine years ago, miscarried or otherwise lost their baby daughter, Seira. They are now hoping that through in-vitro fertilization, Seira-chan will choose them as parents again, and return to them in the form of this new, hoped-for, pregnancy.”

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Perhaps it is difficult for anyone to live up to ideals of the “good spouse.” However, if we look at Mr. Nagamune, the political aide, we see a man who seems to be close to approximating the good husband that he describes. From co-signing as a legal co-owner on a housing loan to sharing housework, he and his wife do it fifty-fifty, as he wants it to be. At the beginning of each week, they look at their schedules and figure out who can most feasibly drop off and pick up the child from daycare. Since he did laundry yesterday, today she will do it. His wife does most of the cooking, but he does the cleaning and taking out the garbage. He does half of everything with the child, too, he told me. But he professed that he is not the “normal” Japanese man. He is a bit like a foreigner, he noted. He owes that to having been raised in a dual-career household, where he watched his parents manage on a daily basis.46 Another thing that makes his life unusual, I should note, is that he is a political aide who, like the self-employed and entrepreneurial men, has a schedule that is more flexible than that of a salaryman. Reading Mr. Nagamune’s interview between the lines, I think he wanted a marriage where neither partner constrains the other, where they both shared the values of being a dual-career couple with children, and where his wife would understand that his career would not be that of a stable salaryman. He also stressed that he wanted a marriage where both partners have their own lives and can spend free time as they wish outside of the family/work framework. In other words, he professed to embrace a more individualistic trend than I saw in other married men in this small survey. While Mr. Nagamune and his wife do not communicate a lot because of their different schedules, he seemed happy with his relationship. He noted that, unlike the stereotype, they do on occasion go out as a couple, enlisting her mother to babysit.

What can be concluded from these men’s opinions on the “good husband” and the stereotypic salaryman? First, it should be emphasized that the salaryman was never more than a stereotype. Men who worked in small businesses, who were self-employed, or who did manual labor for their living were not a part of the myth, as the academic literature has pointed out.47 Yet as a symbol of postwar manhood, the salaryman was and, to an extent, still remains potent.48 While none of the men in the sample stated a longing for a full-time homemaking wife, some did want their wives to limit employment to part-time, and only after the children were older. Here we can see the vestiges of the gendered notion that a man should be the main provider and the woman the main caregiver in the family. All of the men realized that the income of one’s spouse, whether as full-time or part-time worker, would be desirable, even necessary. They all realized that women today want a man who is kind and communicative, and who lends a hand with the housework and childrearing. But they differed in the extent to which they desired to conform or actually responded to these expectations. One can read between the lines that women today have more leverage in the marriage, and the men are more carefully negotiating the boundaries of good “husbandship.” Some of them (such as Mr. Sudo) still insist on their privileges as men, even though they may have held more egalitarian views before marriage, as indeed Mr. Sudo did. Here we must note that the married men have the benefit of hindsight—they are enacting the marriages they once envisioned, and through their narratives we catch glimpses of ideals that were left at the wayside, such as being an egalitarian guy who does half the housework. Other ideals are currently being weighed and negotiated, such as the desire to have one’s wife quit her full-time job so that the children could attend extracurricular activities. (I will discuss the latter trend later in the report.) If we ask why Mr. Sudo gave up on his ideal, we probably have to look no farther than the pressures of being a research scientist, where his male colleagues don’t go home.
until after 10 at night. Mr. Tachibana started out marriage assuming that his wife would be the primary caretaker of their children, but he soon realized the impossibility of this as she couldn’t handle the stress. Another interesting facet of these interviews is the difference that social class makes. Both of the men in blue-collar employment were much more involved in their households (at least by their telling), although Mr. Isehara, because of the extra demands of his position at work, could not always come home as early as he desired. Mr. Tachibana emphasized how his household involvement evolved—he became increasingly involved as he saw that he had to adjust to the changing needs of his spouse. And, I would note, since he owned his own business, he had more flexibility to respond to his wife’s needs than did men who were employees.

Women and the Stereotype of the Salaryman

Let us now turn to the accounts of the women interviewed. How do women respond to the stereotype of the salaryman? Do they see him as totally outdated and unappealing, or were there positive aspects to this mode of being?

ECONOMIC MAINSTAY OF THE HOUSEHOLD

All of the women mentioned that their favorite aspect of the salaryman is that of reliable breadwinner. He is the “pillar of the household,” he protects the wife and children (there is that “protect” role again), he disciplines the children, he is responsible, he is devoted to his work, and he acts in tandem with his wife as a strong family unit.

The narrative about being a pillar of the household came from Ms. Shinjo (27), a programmer, who grew up in rural Saitama. Her perspective is worth noting because it displays the considerable variation in Japanese communities in regard to the responsibilities of householders. She said: “As one would expect, there are things you can’t respond to if you aren’t a man. When you’re building trust, in Japanese culture there are still many occasions where men get together and get things done. My mother also has her mother’s group but...in the town assembly, a man from each family goes as representative to the group. That sort of local relationship-building, and also festivals and celebrations. Marriages, funerals. It’s the men who lead. I think in order to be trusted, it’s best for men to be the pillars of the household.” When I heard Ms. Shinjo’s comments, I recalled the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami (“3/11 earthquake”). Nowhere was it more apparent that men dominated the public sphere of rural areas. Television crews in coastal communities broadcast scene after scene of men gathered outdoors around drum barrels, warming their hands while discussing the next step forward, while women were shown in the shelters taking care of the children.

In regard to men’s essential role as provider, Ms. Kamiya (27), a hair stylist, said that a man has to make a stable living, a proper salary. In her business, she noted, men often quit to find office jobs when they realize how insecure the field of hairdressing is, how long the hours are, and what it takes to become successful. Men quit early on if they realize they are not popular with the customers because they cannot make ends meet on the salary of a beautician, and raising children would be impossible. She laughingly admitted that she certainly will not marry a hair stylist.

Mrs. Takemoto (27), reflecting on her husband’s very long hours at work, said: “Japanese men really have it bad...but probably having women at home doing all the household stuff makes up for that. I say to my husband, ‘Sorry!’” (She laughs.) Here, she is sympathizing with the
salaryman, who comes home exhausted very late, night after night. She herself was engaged in part-time work at the time of our interview, but she foresaw a time when they would start a family and she would quit working, at least while the children were small. She told me that her husband made enough income so they didn’t need her to work.

**MEN AND DOMESTIC WORK**

Similar to the men, the women were in agreement that our stereotype was outdated in various ways. They said that most men do at least some housework and childcare nowadays, but long hours prevent much participation. **Mrs. Watanabe’s** (28) narrative is a case in point. She was working as a regular employee at a large firm. Her own husband, also age 28, works for a TV station and has very long hours, leaving home at 8:30 am and returning around 2 am every night. One day she woke in the morning to find him sleeping in the vestibule. In other words, he had collapsed when he came in the door the night before. He works all weekend as well, except in April and May when the TV station is less busy. They have no seasonal holidays like **Obon** (Buddhist Festival of the Dead, lasting several days in August) or **Oshōgatsu** (New Year’s holidays). They never have time together except for weddings or funerals, which are sacrosanct occasions to take a day off in Japan. Although they both worked full-time, she decided to do all the housework as she thought it would be unkind to force him to do some, since his schedule is so rough. Although her older colleague suggested she hire a foreign worker to help with the housework, she decided against it, noting that if they had children she definitely would hire someone. They have all the electric appliances to help with household chores, and at any rate, she does not try to be a perfectionist, she noted. She manages the purse. For all this, her husband does thank her, and she said he seems to feel guilty.

**Mrs. Takemoto**, the university graduate mentioned above who worked part-time, told me that most men nowadays do participate more in the household, but hers is an exception. She noted, laughing, that her friends tell her they don’t know of anyone who does as little as her husband, who works in an architectural firm. He only takes out the garbage. She does everything else in the household and this bothers her, but she says he is lazy and he works long hours, so [she has resigned herself to it]. Her husband leaves home at 8 am and returns at midnight; he only takes off one day per week, and the only long holidays he takes are Obon and New Year’s. They do go out together when they have time, unlike the stereotype. At the time of the interview, they did not have children yet.

**COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION**

The women I interviewed also told me that most men try to please their wives by saying “thank-you” or by giving gifts, but Mrs. Watanabe felt pity for men who try too hard, by taking the family out on a Sunday, for instance. She seemed to feel that men who work very long hours are already doing enough, and it is not fair to ask them to do more for the family in their very limited free time, nor is it manly for them to accommodate such requests. In her words, “I do know of Japanese men who are active in the household and thankful to their wives, but one side of myself doesn’t quite approve of these men. When I see such men taking their wives and children out on their day off, with the wife looking so proud of herself, and the husband carrying the baby and trying
so hard to make his wife be in a good mood, this makes me think, ‘Shape up, [man]! (Shikkari shinasai!)’” It is interesting that despite having strong career ambitions herself and having spent four years at an elite university, Mrs. Watanabe has a conservative side that expects a couple to maintain their gendered patterns in the household division of labor.

Another interviewee, Ms. Kamiya, thought that young men just out of university are more communicative, but when their work speeds up and they become exhausted, the communication drops off and they start behaving like their fathers, having less time for their interests and losing the capacity to talk much about anything besides work. Ms. Kamiya’s boyfriend, a foreign citizen and teacher at an English conversation school, talks all day long and is tired of talking by the time he gets home. She, as a hair stylist, feels the same way. They do not talk much when they get home at night, she told me.

Thus far, we can see that these youngish adults think that norms regarding the division of household labor, as well as norms about how couples should interact with one another, have changed. However, the realities of very long work hours for some men preclude substantial behavioral change. It is interesting that the breadwinning aspect of the salaryman stereotype was found to be appealing to these women. None of them said that men should not work so hard since women are now also working. Bringing in a stable income is still what defines “the good husband” for most women. This has been found in other scholarship as well. For instance, Emma Cook has demonstrated how difficult it is for young men to marry if they lack stable jobs. Mark West notes that a man’s failure to be a breadwinner is one argument that courts in Japan understand in divorce cases—at the minimum, a man must fulfill that role. For one of my interviewees, the importance of having a stable breadwinning husband had been demonstrated in her natal family, where her father had difficulty holding stable employment, leading her mother to return to school to become a certified teacher so that she could assume that role herself. Her mother explicitly told her not to rely on a man. Watching the challenges her parents faced may make her even more intent on finding a spouse with a stable income.

Another interesting attitude is the pity that some women (Mrs. Watanabe, Mrs. Takemoto) feel for their white-collar spouses, who face brutal work schedules. While Mrs. Watanabe herself works a full-time job, she takes on all of the household duties because of her spouse’s punishing schedule. I have heard similar accounts from many working women in the past. Among scholars, Kumiko Nemoto notes that long hours of work, with service overtime, are valorized in Japan as a symbol of salaryman masculinity. Noriko Tsuya also discusses Japan’s long work hours as being valorized in Japan’s “traditional workplace culture.” Until work culture changes, it is very unlikely that the division of labor within the household will change. Both Mrs. Watanabe and Mrs. Takemoto, as well as presumably Mrs. Sudo (the wife of the engineer who failed to live up to his premarital ideal of a gender-equal household), were willing to accommodate their spouses’ lack of household participation. However, later in this paper I will discuss the case of a couple who, in fact, did divorce over this issue.

**EQUAL PARTNERSHIP VS. COMPANION**

A major theme that came up when considering the interviews as a whole concerned the extent to which a woman could find a partner who viewed her identity as a worker as equally important to his. The homemakers in my sample had already made the decision to support their spouse’s
career over their own; Mrs. Takemoto had quit her full-time job at the time of marriage, while Mrs. Sakai (29), a nurse, quit once she had accumulated enough nursing experience. She was a graduate of a Baccalaureate nursing program and as such, wanted to get more practical experience under her belt before quitting after marriage but before childbirth, in order to raise the child. Neither of these women expected their husbands to view their professional identities as important. Mrs. Takemoto quit her job in kimono retail because she grew tired of the long hours and did not see it as her life’s work, while Mrs. Sakai—although she had conflicting feelings about quitting a job she enjoyed and found worthwhile—still felt that she was needed most as a full-time homemaker, while her child was small. She did express chagrin at her husband’s attitude toward the possibility of her returning to work: “My husband thinks of my returning to work like my joining a sports center.”

If we look at the responses of single women, however, we can see considerable concern over men’s attitudes toward women’s employment. For instance, let us look at the narrative of Ms. Uchida (33), who was single in 2013. From her account, we can surmise that Ms. Uchida was turned off on marrying due to an experience she had with her first serious boyfriend. He thought her life should revolve around him. It was fine with him if she had a job, but he did not expect her to take it seriously:

“He had to move around a lot in that job, and he wanted me to move with him. I said, ‘Then what about me?’ and he said, ‘Well, you can get a part-time job or whatever, each time we move.’ When he said that, we had a terrible argument. He would seem to be happy if I showed an interest in something or started studying something, but as I got deeper into something, he didn’t really want that. As long as I didn’t upset his lifestyle, he’d be okay with it, but if I was going to try to do it as my work, he would ask me to quit it…”

Ms. Uchida wanted a partnership, but her boyfriend just wanted a companion. Their relationship lasted ten years, and they broke up when she was 28. Although he wanted to marry, she just could not bring herself to do it: “I didn’t really have a reason to refuse [to marry] him. It was fun to be with him, there was no reason to turn him down. Probably, he was a salaryman and stable, and he was the age where his parents would be asking him to marry, and I thought it might be okay, but I just couldn’t be convinced (laughs). I just couldn’t say ‘yes!’”

As a result of her long-term boyfriend’s attitude, Ms. Uchida broke up their relationship and followed an atypical path. She works part-time installing art for exhibitions, but her main love in life is her devotion to avant-garde theatre, which she discovered after age 30. She does have another partner now, but he is much older (in his fifties) and she cannot even bring herself to live near him, much less to cohabit with him.

Echoing Ms. Uchida’s anxiety over pursuing a career was the hair stylist, Ms. Kamiya, who said, “The good husband is one who would not tell me to stop working.” She is putting a huge effort into learning to cut hair professionally, and she does not want this effort to be wasted. Ms. Shinjo, too, said she wanted a husband who would allow her to keep working as a regular employee, and who would both work and share household tasks.

This attitude is similar to the one I found in some blue-collar women in the early 1980s, who had made the unconventional choice to stay on the line as regular employees despite pressure from
What surprised me in this study is that from Ms. Uchida’s comment, we can see that even after thirty years have passed, and even in uncertain economic times, some young men today apparently ask their wives to stop working. According to national survey data, the percentage of men surveyed who want their wives to become full-time homemakers had dropped to an all-time low of 10.9 percent in 2010, down from 38 percent in 1987. Even so, the possibility of one’s spouse holding such an attitude was quite real to these women in the 2000s. On the other hand, looking at the same survey, we also know that there are women in the 2000s whose ideal lifestyle is that of the professional housewife. Although the proportion of women surveyed who express this desire has gone down—from almost one-third of all respondents in 1987 to almost one-fifth of all respondents in 2010—it is interesting to know that nowadays more women wish to be professional housewives than men wish that their future spouses would take on this role.

Most of the men in my sample did not subscribe to a vision of equal partnership in marriage if it meant both partners sharing household and work roles equally. Of the four single men, Mr. Nomura and Mr. Murai expressed the strongest expectation for their future wives to work. Mr. Murai, the one who appeared to be the most supportive of sharing the division of labor, envisioned having his wife hold down a stable and well-paying job while he operated his restaurant business. Mr. Nomura, in contrast, wanted his spouse to work part-time, although he did not wish her to work when their children were small. Rather, he impressed me as a man who, given his own modest salary, recognized the necessity of having an employed wife in order to sustain a middle-class household. He later declared he would not want a wife who was a regular employee: “Actually, to tell you the truth, I don’t find women who want high careers to be terribly attractive. I doubt if we’d get along well. Because I myself am not seeking to become anything big or to climb the ladder.” Mr. Nomura’s comments about wanting a wife who would be content with a less-important job while assuming the bulk of household duties resonate well with the findings of a qualitative study of Japanese never-married, employed men. The study notes, “The Japanese men’s unchanging desire for women who are docile and domestic may reflect the influence of the Japanese employment structure, which requires men’s exclusive devotion to work...”

Mr. Morita, the unemployed cram-school teacher, only wanted his wife to work part-time at most to supplement his low income, but did not want her to work until the children were in elementary school. Furthermore, he would like her to be a good money manager and do the household accounts, because this is not his strong suit. As noted earlier, he also hopes to find someone who would share with him her worries and her joys. Unlike his father, he likes to cook, and claimed that if he marries, he will share everything except ironing.

The youngest interviewee, Mr. Kondo, did not mind if his wife worked or not as long as they had enough time together as a family.

One of the respondents who did have a wife working full-time wished it were not so. Mr. Isehara, the printing factory group leader, said he would like his wife to step down from full-time employment because their children are getting to the age when they want to take lessons such as swimming, baseball, and piano, and their current work schedules make it too difficult to manage. Here, he is influenced by his own upbringing; he told me that his mother was always at home when he was small, and he himself was the beneficiary of extracurricular activities that he could not have participated in had it not been for his mother. He said that is much better for the children. The pressure on parents to put their children into after-school enrichment classes and cram schools...
is high. Although Mr. Isehara and his wife have been discussing the possibility of her quitting and getting a part-time position closer to home, they have not decided yet. Apparently, he wants her to quit more than she does. This may also be due to the fact that she manages the household accounts and understands the ramifications of her quitting. Furthermore, Mr. Isehara has taken a salary cut now that his overtime hours from shift work on the shop floor are gone. Instead, he has been promoted to group leader, so has to spend unpaid hours after the day shift ends to meet with clients. I could not interview Mrs. Isehara to understand her views on this issue, but this awaits future research.

Other married respondents with working wives expected their wives to continue working. For Mr. Tachibana, whose wife worked part-time in the school lunch program, the income from her job was important to the family. The professional job held by Mr. Sudo’s wife also supported the family’s solidly upper-middle-class life. Without her stable employment, many of the luxuries they currently afforded (private schools for the children, extra lessons, home ownership) would have to be reassessed. Mr. Nagamune’s wife held a job at a regular company, which enabled him to continue in his unstable position as a politician’s secretary, subject to the whims of elections. In that sense, he and Mr. Murai were the most entrepreneurial of the men I interviewed, and both of them professed to support equal partnerships, including expectations that their spouses (or future spouse, in Mr. Murai’s case) would continue working.

To finish this discussion of the theme of equal and shared partnership versus companion marriages, I would like to introduce the narrative of Ms. Kase, the only divorcee in my sample. Ms. Kase (35) had strong opinions about the stereotypic salaryman, formed mostly, it seems, from her experience with married life. Her own husband, although he avowed that he would not

“A hope to marry and be happy, and put the past behind me.”

A woman’s petition to the divine: a new start
follow the stereotype, ended up approximating it in many ways. Ms. Kase’s story reveals the difficulties men have in breaking away from stereotypic work behavior. While Ms. Kase seemed to place all the blame for his failure to be a good husband squarely on his shoulders, from her account I could see that he may also have been pressured by his firm to act as a career man should act, which gave him very little leeway for his family or household chores. In other words, structural factors in the firm’s environment that incorporate expectations about how men should perform played a large part in this family’s breakup.

First of all, both Ms. Kase and her husband, although Japanese nationals themselves, were raised and educated in Hong Kong until entering university, at which point they returned to Japan. They had met in their Japanese elementary school in Hong Kong and reunited during their university years in Japan. Because they had been raised in a very international environment, she noted, they both wanted a different kind of marriage than most Japanese people have. He expected her to work, and he supported her in it, she said. But although he said he would share the housework, he never practiced what he preached. He didn’t cook, clean, or shop, and he would use being busy at work as an excuse to not come home, she related. In the end, Ms. Kase had to do it all, despite the fact that she, too, had a career position in her firm.

Ms. Kase’s husband certainly did resemble the stereotypic husband in terms of the long hours he kept. He worked as an IT consultant for a foreign firm, with many hours of overtime. She worked in financial services, also at a foreign firm. The fact that her salary was higher than his was a sore point with him, she noted, because he was very competitive. Ms. Kase thought that he did try to cooperate when they were first married, but a baby created complexity in their lives. Their older son was born at the end of their first year of marriage, and she returned to her job after a ten-month childcare leave. As she worked in investment banking where overtime is heavy (until 2 am most days), her parents—who had returned from Hong Kong—agreed to take the baby during the week. During that first year upon returning to work, she and her husband picked up the baby and cared for him on the weekend. Her parents would then drive to their place on Sunday night to retrieve the baby again. This arrangement meant that both she and her husband could work overtime from Monday to Friday. Why were her parents so cooperative? She told me it was on account of her being an only child, and because they really wanted her to be able to return to work. After the first year, her firm opened a daycare center on the premises, and she also changed departments to one with less overtime, allowing her to go home by 8 pm. As a result, the couple took the baby back from her parents and started managing on their own again. She did the morning drop-off as well as the pick-up, since it was her firm’s daycare center. She traveled to work on a packed train every morning during rush hour with the baby. Her husband, she noted, probably felt free. He began to do longer hours at work and also went out to eat more often. She, however, had changed departments for the sake of the child, both giving up working nights and the freedom to go out to eat with her friends. All this gradually increased her stress, she noted. It was from this point on that she thinks she and her husband started having different interpretations of their situation. Nevertheless, they had a second child, since both of them were only children and they felt a child should have a sibling. But even before the second child was born, her husband was not putting any time into the household and he was working straight through the weekends, “as if that were the natural thing to do.” When the second child was two months old, her husband was sent abroad by the firm, and since she was on maternity leave, she accompanied him. Although they could spend a lot of time together there, she had to return from childcare.
leave after six months, leaving him abroad for the remainder of his assignment. Upon his return, things did not go well when she asked him to help with the children. He packed up all his things and left their apartment, telling her that he did not want to come back. In her analysis, he had tasted the freedom of living without restrictions after she and the children returned to Japan, and he did not want to be constrained again. He had also found a lover. She and the children began to live with her parents, and shortly thereafter, her husband asked for a divorce.

Needless to say, these events colored Ms. Kase’s notion of the good husband. To her, she noted, the most important feature is responsibility. A man is responsible to protect his wife and children as the husband, and to be the pillar of the household—even if she did work outside the home. Yet her husband left them without even leaving a contact number, and refused to answer her calls or emails. The children were only ages four and one at the time. From that experience, she told me, she learned that while you can’t cut your ties with your children even if you try, the person you marry is just a stranger, and you can’t take him [his loyalty] for granted. Ms. Kase told me that she had felt secure in their intimacy, but she was wrong and now she regrets it. In the end, to her, the good husband is one who feels responsibility and who prioritizes his family over his work. She blames her husband for what she considers his totally selfish behavior, putting his career before his family. Interestingly enough, though, Ms. Kase also seemed to blame herself, for not showing her husband more commitment so that he would know how serious she was, and for not having given enough to him without being asked. In that utterance, she seemed to be clinging to an earlier era’s ideal of the wife who devotes herself diligently to her spouse through her quiet service, through onoiyari.63

What can we take away from this story? When they were young, before marriage, Ms. Kase and her husband had both developed ideas about how they should cooperate as much as possible with household and family care. She noted that they were in love when they married, and that when her husband was still in a junior position at work, he was willing to put time into the household. When she returned to work from her first maternity leave and the baby was back with her and her husband during the week, she used the company’s daycare and switched jobs to be able to get home by 8 pm. At that point, her husband did try to be cooperative, she noted. She asked him to make a chart to divide their tasks at home—“this is for you to do, this is for me”—and he did it readily. But after several months, when he saw she was managing well, he started slacking off. By the time she was rising in her own job again and starting to feel pressured for time, “the list we had made had been totally forgotten.” Ms. Kase saw her husband’s retreat from the household and the family as a selfish lack of commitment to them.

Of course, Mr. Kase is not able to voice his opinion, but this picture of the husband’s retreat from the sphere of family life sounds very much like Sandra Salamon’s analysis of salaryman/professional housewife family dynamics of the 1970s.64 In this case, however, the wife is also working in a highly stressful, full-time career, without any substantial help at home. It is possible that Mr. Kase had decided that, in order to rise in his firm, he had to throw himself into his work. There is not much difference between his behavior and that of the project system engineers of Leslie Perlow’s 1997 research in the United States.65 If we look at similar families in Hong Kong, the difference between the Kase family in Japan and an upper-middle-class family in Hong Kong is that the latter might have hired a full-time housekeeper. The Kase family, on the other hand, relied only on themselves, not even hiring part-time domestic help once they had taken the baby from her parents’ care. In my 2002 study of the Japanese government’s “Angel Plan” to combat
the falling birthrate, I discuss the angry reaction of some men to the government’s campaign, whose message suggested that total commitment to one’s work is not sufficient for a man to be called “father.” In addition, a father must provide hands-on care for his children. These men felt that their commitment to their families was demonstrated in long hours at work, and that that was plenty. Mr. Kase, now in an environment where long hours were the norm and men were cut no slack for having children, may have given up on his earlier ideals. The impossibility of being both a “good husband” and a “top employee” may have brought him to the breaking point. Another factor that is not mentioned in this interview, but which I think is quite important, is that the majority of men in Japanese firms do not have wives who work full-time, much less in management positions. If they are married, their wives either work part-time or they are professional housewives. This means that men whose wives work full-time are under extra pressure, as the other men at work do not appreciate their situation and are less willing to accommodate their need to work fewer hours. In the future, if women do indeed enter full-time career work in greater numbers, this will change, but men like Mr. Kase are currently a minority. Recognizing the pressures on her husband, however, would not change Ms. Kase’s anger over his abandonment of their ideals and their family.

Envisioning the Family: Readiness

One theme that strongly resounded throughout the interviews was that of readiness, or preparedness, for marriage. Marriage in Japan is not an institution that people enter casually. First, it is still generally expected that marriage will entail having at least one child. Furthermore, marriage is supposed to take place before childbirth—ideally, according to some of my interviewees, a couple of years before—to allow the couple to enjoy each other’s company. Mr. Nomura, for example, mentioned looking forward to having this time as a couple.

MEN’S READINESS

More important than timing is that the couple be economically stable before their child is born. As Mr. Sudo, the engineer, put it, “You can’t raise a child until you have some status.” This, he noted, should be in regular employment, not a student job. In fact, only two of the women interviewed for this project said that they would not or might not mind a man’s job status when considering him as a marriage prospect. The fact that women refrain from marrying men who are economically unstable has been previously documented. Mr. Isehara, the mechanic, told me, “The right time to have a child is when you can afford to have one.” This was echoed in comments by Mr. Nomura and Mr. Murai (see Figure 2).

Aside from economic readiness, are there any other constraints that men face? One issue tied to economic readiness is a man’s age. While women’s age as a constraint in childbearing is often discussed due to the “biological clock,” men, too, face constraints in Japan. This is due to the expected retirement age of sixty. As is clearly argued by Mr. Morita, at thirty-eight, he is approaching the limit of being able to marry, have a child, and see that child through to the legal adulthood age of twenty. Of course, this attitude is based on the assumption that the father will be earning the lion’s share of income, and also reflects a salaryman perspective. Men who are self-employed are less constrained by the retirement age.
In the period of high economic growth that lasted through the 1980s, the established Japanese “life course” generally followed a sequence of non-overlapping events: graduation from one’s last year of schooling, employment, marriage, the first child’s birth, the second child’s birth, entrance and graduation of one’s children from school (university, if middle class), their marriages, and one’s retirement. Indeed, men received discrimination at work if they did not marry, and women, too, experienced the cold gaze of society if they failed to marry, or if they married but failed to give birth. Today, however, there is much more variation in life paths, as people push back the age of marriage. As we can see from Figure 2, over the past 40 years, the age of first marriage has increased considerably. On average, men now marry at 30.3 and women at 32.5. Some scholars point out that discrimination against the unmarried has also waned as singlehood becomes increasingly common, if not normative. At the very least, single adults now form a sizeable minority. Nowadays, 47 percent of men and 35 percent of women in their early thirties, and 36 percent of men and 23 percent of women in their late thirties, are single. Yet one respondent, Mr. Murai, the restaurateur, clearly saw marriage as a societal marker of adulthood, which he noted he had not attained. As an over-thirty-year-old man who still hadn’t married, he noted that he could count himself as among the “losers” in Japan, while the “winners” are those who marry and have children. The referent to his comment is Junko Sakai’s popular novel from 2004, Make Inu no Tōboe (The Howl of a Loser Dog), which ruefully pointed out that Japanese women who fail to marry and have children are considered the “losing dogs” of society.

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Murai’s observation. One could conclude that society has yet to fully embrace the single lifestyle, for either gender. The same could be said for career-focused women. A man’s ambition at work is considered his rightful duty as a householder. For women, ambition indicates negligence as a householder, since she should be at home supporting her family with domestic work, not out in the labor force—and definitely not climbing the career ladder as an unmarried woman. When Walter Edwards wrote his seminal book on marriage in Japan, *Modern Japan through Its Weddings*, he deemed this strict separation of spheres by gender “complementary incompetence,” and he observed that for the Japanese, full adulthood comes only through marriage to a partner who can make up for one’s gendered incompetence. While economic pressures, increasing levels of education, and women’s growing desires for career positions have called into question this way of living, these “separate sphere” values are deeply rooted and intertwined into corporate practices, as well as social practices. Breaking the mold and leading an innovative lifestyle remains a challenge, especially as women who have careers still tend to be measured by society in terms of their accomplishments (or lack thereof, as the case may be) in marriage and family, rather than by their kudos in the workplace.72

For the men in my research, readiness for marriage implied, first and foremost, economic stability. Married and unmarried men alike made comments indicating the gravity of marriage for a man, and the importance of planning ahead to be able to provide for the family. All of the unmarried men looked forward to marrying, though they did not necessarily feel the timing was right yet. Of the four men, Mr. Nomura was the one most ready in the sense of having secure employment, but only Mr. Murai actually had a partner; the others were not dating. Mr. Kondo, at twenty-three, had not yet reached marriageable age, but the others had all passed the mark of average age at first marriage. With the men, I did not get the sense that they were hesitating over marriage because of a wish to remain independent. They all seemed to desire marriage. My hunch is that Mr. Morita, who had a very spotty working career and was currently unemployed, would have difficulty in finding a partner. Furthermore, he was an oldest son, meaning that he might be responsible one day for his parents’ care. Mr. Nomura, too, was an only son and actually lived with his parents. While he seemed to be sociable and communicative, it might be difficult for him to find a mate given his emotional closeness to his parents, a relationship that might not be attractive to many young women. Furthermore, his income was not particularly high, nor was it forecast to increase. One might think that a woman with career ambitions would find a perfect match in Mr. Nomura, who had a job where he would be able pick up the children from daycare. But Mr. Nomura was not interested in ambitious women; he only wanted a partner who earned less than him, held a part-time job, and who could take on the greater share of the domestic work.

**WOMEN’S READINESS**

The single women who were interviewed hesitated to marry, but for different reasons than the men. None of them were worried about their own economic readiness for marriage; the role of provider was for the men. In this sense, they were squarely in the conventional mode. Much of their hesitation and unease seemed to stem from a vague but nagging concern that one day they might be called upon to make the sacrifice of caring for their husband’s family. This was mentioned by Ms. Kishino (29), who, in discussing the problem of being a *yome* (daughter-in-law with all the concomitant responsibilities to the patriline), noted: “In the countryside, if you marry a
first-born son, you have to deal not only with his parents, but also with the community. They have old customs.” She remarked that before marrying, she would want to know exactly what she was getting into. She would not want to be told by extended family or the community that she should be taking care of her in-laws, for instance. Although Ms. Kishino did want to marry and have children, she did not want the burdens of an extended family thrust on her ex post facto. Ms. Kishino grew up in a rural area of Aomori Prefecture, at the northern tip of Honshu, where notions about a yome and her duties are still strong. She knew what to watch out for in a potential spouse.

In fact, Mrs. Watanabe, although an urbanite, was beginning to experience this very problem. She and her husband live in Tokyo and do not reside with his parents, but she feared that they expected her to be a caregiver for them in the future. This is something to which she had not given consideration before she married. She, who had been raised in Tokyo by a family without notions of yome duties, had no wish to be the yome of the family at that time. However, just as Ms. Kishino described above, Mrs. Watanabe’s in-laws had begun to subtly pressure her.

Another reason that the interviewed single women had difficulties with the prospect of marriage was because they thought it would mean giving up their independence and their personal space. For instance, Ms. Kishino told me that for her, the good husband would be someone who did not interfere with her, someone who she would not mind living with, especially after a decade (since age nineteen) spent living on her own. She wanted someone who would do part of the household work, who would communicate with her, and who would not expect her to visit his parents often. She was trying to avoid the fate of marrying the wrong man, the one whose relatives would demand too much of her. But at the time we talked, she did wish to marry, and she wished to become a full-time homemaker. Her sister had chosen well, marrying a man who, while an only son, does not live near his parents or share in their business enterprise. Ms. Kishino herself, however, was not in a relationship at the time of our interview.

Ms. Uchida (33) told me that for the past three years she had been in a relationship with a never-married man who was seventeen years her senior, but she did not wish to marry him as he has many weird likes and dislikes. She could not even think of moving to live closer to his place, because she was afraid it would upset the rhythm of her lifestyle. She liked the normal routine of getting up, going to work, and coming home. She did not want this routine broken. She also told me that while her current partner is not silent like the stereotypic salaryman, too much communication can be a problem. In her mind, the stereotype of the salaryman has staying power because it gives the two partners in marriage plenty of room to operate independently. She remarked, “It’s important to be able to discuss everything intimately, but if you pursue it too closely you get so you can’t breathe, so you need somewhat of a cushion. It’s good to have some distance.”

Among the men, there were also those who mentioned the importance of keeping some space between themselves and their spouses, but they were not the single men. One, if you will recall, was Mr. Nagamune, the political aide, who did everything fifty-fifty with his spouse and wanted to make sure that each had his/her own time. Another was Mr. Sudo, the engineer, who seems to have prioritized his own time at the expense of his wife’s. Then there was Mr. Tachibana, who did chores in the household to build a kind of goodwill account with his wife so that he could go out with the boys without incurring her anger. The only one of these three who appeared to be creating a new pattern is Mr. Nagamune; the other two strategies are nothing new. The single men in this research did not bring up any fear of losing their independent lives upon marriage. Rather,
they seemed to envision it with confidence, or at least they expressed a yearning for the prospect of building a marriage and a family. This is not representative of all single men in Japan, however. One study of twenty-five employed, never-married men found that some men did not see marriage as particularly beneficial or desirable, but as constraining and a blow to men’s autonomy.73

Other observations of the female informants that pointed to a lack of marriage readiness are tied to fear about how she would be perceived at her workplace if she were to marry and have a child. Marriage itself is difficult enough to announce at the workplace, let alone childbirth. Many career women I interviewed in the early 2000s noted that they had delayed telling their bosses about their marriage plans, lest their bosses assume they were not serious about their work:74 Three female respondents in the current research mentioned that while women often want to postpone having children until their career is solid, reality often intervenes. As Ms. Uchida wryly observed: “It’s not like you think you want a child and then you get pregnant. It’s like, you get pregnant and then you think, ‘What am I going to do with a child? How am I going to be a mother?’ …the timing [is off].”

Women’s fears that pregnancy would lead to trouble at work are well-founded. *Mata-hara* (maternity harassment) is a well-known phenomenon. Although patently illegal, the legal framework against harassment has thus far failed to eradicate the practice:75 One of the male interviewees confirmed this by relating an incident from his former workplace:

“Marriage is okay for men, but for women, it’s not. They may give birth…and people say, ‘She’s undoubtedly going to quit one of these days.’ That’s how they look at her. There was actually a case like that [at my previous firm]. For instance, in meetings, they would say, ‘That woman, she’s really good, and we’d like to promote her.’ But when somebody says it looks like she’s getting married, they would say, ‘Well then, let’s think of some other woman,’ and in the end, the capable woman doesn’t get the promotion. Only women. It doesn’t affect men. On the contrary, for men, marriage has a positive effect. It’s because of the household. They think, ‘That guy has a household so [we’ll promote him].’… People think you will try harder at work because you’ll feel more responsibility toward those you are protecting.”

Ms. Shinjo, the programmer, told me that women at her firm had lost their jobs when they returned from childcare leave, and she blamed this on the attitudes of the corporate managers. She also once worked for a very small firm of only six employees. They worked overtime every day, and taking time off was difficult. She remarked, “In such situations, managers ask which one you are going to choose: your home life or the company?”

These kinds of cautionary tales about discrimination against women in the workforce and the difficulties they meet when marrying or bearing children are regularly reported in the news. It is common knowledge. Hence, I would argue, such knowledge forms the backdrop against which women assess their strategies. If a woman wants to remain working throughout marriage and childrearing, then she must choose a man who will be amenable. She must then figure out when to tell her boss and colleagues, fearing that her commitment to the firm will be questioned. She can only hope that she will not be subject to bullying or to a sudden transfer of her spouse to a remote location, which would jeopardize her own career. For women who are serious about their careers, then, marriage is a big risk. Even if a woman manages to stay employed, she is likely to...
assume the lion’s share of domestic work on the home front. This state of affairs is partly responsible for discouraging career-oriented women from marrying at all. Yet, not all women wish to stay on at work. Some, discussed below, view marriage and family life as an opportunity to find meaning and fulfillment, free from the demands of employment.

MARRIAGE AS AN EXIT STRATEGY FOR WOMEN

Scholars have noted that women in Japan often choose to leave their jobs at the culturally sanctioned time of marriage, or at least by the birth of the first child, partly because of workplace discrimination that places them in unfulfilling jobs with no upward path. While the women I talked with raised many fears about taking the step to marry, some of them also noted that there are women who perceive marriage as an exit strategy to a boring job. If they marry a man who is well enough off to support the family on his own income, they need not stay on at their own workplace. Ms. Uchida told me that she has many friends who are anxious because although they are in regular employment, they lack a credential that would help them quit and reenter the labor market, if needed. These women want to change firms as they find their work boring and cannot see themselves remaining at the same firm for decades. Many have become depressed, she noted, and do not see a way forward, especially since they would lose out by changing jobs in Japan’s internal labor market. They do not find inspiration in the models of women who have stayed at their firm, who work at the company until late every night. Ms. Uchida told me that when a woman becomes pregnant, the woman thinks this lifestyle would be totally untenable with children. Uchida thinks their husbands want them to return after childcare leave, but in the end, they often fail to return. Although she did not know how many women quit who would have preferred to remain on the job, she remarked that pregnancy is an easy excuse for quitting a tedious job. Most of the women she knew, she said, are not thinking of their lives down the road when it will be difficult to find regular employment. They just think it will work out somehow. For women whose employment is not so exciting, for those who have not groomed themselves to become a particular kind of professional, marriage and pregnancy seem to still hold a lot of attraction, she said. She also blamed this situation on the economy, saying that women her age (33 in 2012) faced an Ice Age in employment after completing their educations. People took anything just to be employed, even if they didn’t particularly want the job. They were not motivated, and when they reached a dead end, they quit. This is what the labor economist Genda Yuji refers to as job mismatch, which occurred due to the bad economy for that generation of workers.

Ms. Uchida’s account leads us to believe that many women decide to exit employment due to lack of incentive to remain in a job they dislike, and that the possibility of becoming a full-time housewife and mother is still culturally sanctioned and appealing. Ms. Uchida’s friends worry over their choice, but they nevertheless take this option. In reviewing interview data, this is also the trajectory that Mrs. Takemoto followed. She did not have a special credential beyond her bachelor of arts degree, and although she worked hard in her job as a kimono salesperson, there were aspects of it that she found ethically questionable, and the long hours were stressful as well. She quit when she married her architect husband, and in 2014, two years after our interview, she had two children and was a full-time homemaker in the suburbs. For Mrs. Takemoto, readiness to quit and readiness to marry coincided. Yet before she became pregnant, she was planning to study to obtain an interior decorator’s license, which would complement her husband’s skills as
an architect should he one day go out on his own. In this sense, she was evaluating the possibilities and planning for a segue back into employment at some point in the future.

What makes women most anxious, perhaps, is the notion of staying on forever in an unappealing job with long hours and a lot of unpleasantness. As Ms. Uchida summed it up, marriage is a woman’s refuge from a dull job, the result of a mismatch in the labor market during bad economic times. Perhaps that is why so many women find “being the breadwinner” the most desirable aspect of the salaryman stereotype—someone they can lean on, build a family with, and at the same time, use as an excuse to quit a tedious job. My thirty-something female hairdresser’s assessment of the generation that preceded her was this: “Women of the EEOL [equal employment opportunity law] generation worked like crazy and forfeited marriage. We saw this and prefer to quit and rely on the man to bring in the income.”

From the above accounts, it is clear that these youngish adults see childbirth as going hand-in-hand with marriage (see Figure 8). Actually, though, researchers have found that, according to period life-table estimates, the rate of childlessness among married couples is approximately 10 percent.79 Perhaps in those instances we see the gap between expectation and reality. But what about the period between hooking up with someone and settling down to marriage? Is cohabitation an acceptable lifestyle in Japan as it is in some parts of Europe or North America? The total rate of cohabitation in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries in 2010 was 12.4 percent for ages 20–34, but in Japan the rate is comparatively low.80 According to the National Institute for Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR), the percentage of people cohabiting in Japan was trending upward until 2002, when it peaked at 7.6 percent, but has decreased a bit in recent years.81 In 2010, the cohabitation rate for those surveyed ages 18–34 was 5.8 percent, double the 2.8 percent rate of 1987.82 So, while there has

**Figure 8. Mothers’ working status before and after first birth**

The majority of working women quit employment by the birth of the first child.

been a slight reversal, cohabitation has increased considerably in Japan since the late 1980s, but it remains less than half the OECD average.

Furthermore, in the United States and in some European Union countries, it is commonplace to give birth outside of marriage. In Japan, however, this is rare. The out-of-wedlock birthrate was less than 2.14 percent of all births in 2010. The rate of births where the length of marriage is less than the length of gestation, however, rose more than twofold between 1980 and 2004, reaching over one-quarter of births in 2004. This statistic seems to indicate a very conservative stance on birth outside of marriage. I asked this set of youngish adults about their opinions on cohabitation, marriage at pregnancy, and birth out of wedlock to see how they viewed these lifestyles.

COHABITATION

Men’s Views of Cohabitation

Most of the male interviewees (5 of 8) were all-around positive about cohabitation. For instance, Mr. Nomura (32, single) saw it as risk mitigation, as a trial before marriage, and as a time to synchronize values together. Like Mr. Isehara (39, married), he mentioned that it is best to have a trial because when you enter someone into your household register, it “complicates things.” Mr. Isehara said, “If you marry and then find out you’re incompatible, you would harm the family register (by divorcing) and there would be a lot of social risks, such as batsu ichi.” He thought it was okay to live together as long as you do so while thinking of marriage as the endpoint. He never cohabited, but a former girlfriend used to have him stay over several nights a week. Mr. Tachibana (39, married), had twice cohabited, the second time ending in marriage due to pregnancy. The first time he was young (20), and his partner was a university student, who did not share his love of automobiles whatsoever. She urged him to quit that hobby. He ended the relationship after four months. Like Mr. Nomura and Mr. Isehara, Mr. Tachibana mentioned the problem of causing a “batsu ichi” on the family register were one to marry in haste and divorce. So, ironically, the conservative values inherent in the family registration system encourage an innovative behavior.

Mr. Morita, (38, single), noted that his thinking has changed on cohabitation. He used to disapprove, but now thought it would be a good idea in order to see everything before taking the leap. He said he may have been influenced by his sister, who has been living with her boyfriend for a decade now. He noted that he has never lived with anyone or even known a woman with whom he wanted to cohabit. He pointed out one issue that might resonate with other single people who live alone, however: it might be difficult to cohabit because you would have to share your space with someone else. “People who value their own personal space and time probably hesitate to live together.” There is now a sizeable population of single men in urban areas who live alone. Mr. Morita’s comment makes one wonder whether extended years of living alone act as a drag on marriage. In other words, as people live alone longer, and as more people live alone, this lifestyle may become an acceptable choice, as some argue is the case in the United States. Mr. Morita summarized his opinion by saying that if people have marriage as a goal, then living together would be a good idea, but he is not in agreement with it if it’s just the rash behavior of youth (wakage no itari).

Mr. Murai, the restaurateur (31, single), has had two experiences of cohabitation, both of which he ended by cutting off the relationship. In both cases, the couple had thought they might
marry, but it did not work out. Now, he would like to try a third time with his current girlfriend, but because she lives with her mother, a divorcée, he might have to live at their place, with the premise of marrying. That would make it very difficult to break up if it wasn’t working out, he noted. Here, then, we have him thinking of combining an unconventional behavior with a very filial twist!

The three men who were less positive about cohabitation were Mr. Sudo, the research engineer (36, married); Mr. Nagamune, the political aide (34, married); and Mr. Kondo, the former defense employee (23, single). Mr. Sudo pointed out that people don’t want to have children until they register their marriages, so they simply cohabit. This then dampens the marriage rate, he thinks, because they discover all the negative aspects of each other in the meantime. He has known of couples who cohabited and married, as well as those who cohabited and parted, but he himself never did it, and he found the practice a bit disgraceful. Mr. Kondo did not understand cohabitation as a behavior. Living together, in his mind, is the same as being married. So why not just get married, he asked. Mr. Nagamune’s opinion was quite similar to that of Mr. Kondo. Among his own friends, most who cohabited split up, he notes. He thinks that living together takes the attractiveness out of getting married, but all in all, it’s up to the individual and not for him to judge.

Taken as a whole, what common ideas emerge on this topic? First, cohabitation as a contemporary option was familiar to all the men. Second, they all thought that it would help one to understand the habits of the partner better. Some of them mentioned it as a way to avoid marrying the family register—cohabiting is better than divorce. On the downside, the men mentioned that it would take the attractiveness out of marriage, which would become merely the act of filing papers. From conversations with them, it certainly sounded as if cohabitation was a common phenomenon in their lives, nothing particularly surprising, but also nothing to be particularly open about. In discussing this topic, several people mentioned that parents might not like their children to cohabit, and that parents’ negative opinions would be a reason they would not do it.

Women’s Views of Cohabitation

Six of the eight women I interviewed also had mostly positive views toward cohabitation. Those who were cohabiting or who had cohabited in the past were Ms. Kamiya (27), Mrs. Takemoto (27), and Mrs. Watanabe (28). The latter two women ended up marrying their cohabiting partners. Mrs. Watanabe’s parents did not object to her cohabitation, but Mrs. Takemoto’s parents at first opposed but then agreed when the couple promised that they did intend to marry in the future. Mrs. Takemoto also had a previous cohabitation when she was a student and living away from her parents, which she kept secret from them. This leads me to suspect that many cohabitations do not appear in the statistics because young people do not disclose them. The other three women told me stories of both break-ups and marriages that resulted from their friends’ or relatives’ experiences with cohabitation. The reasons for cohabiting were that it was just an extension of dating, and that it’s cheap and convenient to live together where urban rents are high. Mrs. Sakai mentioned cohabitation as a kind of insurance; if you register in the man’s koseki and then find you are incompatible, you cannot separate. Breakups mentioned were spurred by discoveries of disparity in values (for instance, finding out one’s boyfriend is a spendthrift). Ms. Kishino (29) thought the practice is a bit too casual, and others might see it as a bit slovenly (darashinai), but she would nevertheless consider cohabitating in the future if she has a boyfriend. The two people who had more negative views were Ms. Kase (35), the career woman from Hong Kong, and Ms.
Uchida (33), the avant-garde theatre player/art installer. Ms. Kase noted that she was not the sort of person who likes to do things halfway, so she preferred to simply marry. Ms. Uchida, although not disapproving of the practice for others, could not see herself wanting to live with or even near her boyfriend.

Ms. Kamiya (27), who was currently in a cohabiting relationship, mentioned a couple of features of the arrangement that are instructive. One is that most people who cohabit do not tell their landlords. It is an informal arrangement because most landlords discriminate against unwed couples leasing flats. Indeed, one wonders if they are truthful in surveys either. Another point she made is that she often hears her girlfriends complain that their live-in boyfriends hardly mention marriage, and that without pressure from the parents, talk of marriage does not come up easily. I can surmise that in today’s economy, cohabitation is an attractive option for young people who have not yet established that solid economic base they believe is required for marriage. Cohabitation is economical, convenient, and one’s parents need not find out about it. Yet, it is not necessarily an option that is well-accepted by all. The National Institute for Population and Social Security Research reports that 73.5 percent of men and 67.4 percent of women ages 18–34 surveyed in 2010 agreed with the statement, “If a man and a woman are living together, they should marry.”

“SHOTGUN” MARRIAGE AND EXTRAMARITAL CHILDBIRTH

Marriages with pregnancy as the impetus are on the rise in Japan, composing just over one-quarter of all marriages in 2009. Since the marriage rate has fallen in the past two decades, and because people are very unlikely to have babies outside of marriage, this phenomenon is noteworthy.

Among the interviewees, two of the men, Mr. Isehara and Mr. Tachibana, married because of their partners’ pregnancies. Perhaps thinking about the lack of strong social pressure on young people to marry nowadays, Mr. Tachibana said, “In a sense, it’s an opportunity. In today’s world, if there isn’t some kind of stimulus, people won’t end up getting married.” Mr. Isehara married at age thirty to a woman he had intended to marry anyway. They went on to have one more child. Although it has worked out fine for them, he said that many of these marriages happen with much younger couples, often ending in divorce. If you are going to have a shotgun marriage, he said, it is best after the age of thirty (when one is mature). Mr. Nagamune knew people who had shotgun marriages, only to divorce later. In his mind, it is okay as long as the married couple having a baby really understands what it means to have a child. Mr. Kondo disapproved of shotgun marriages if the couple was not marrying out of love, but only because of the pregnancy. In such cases, he thought, there would be a high risk of divorce, of which he is very disapproving. Mr. Sudo also disapproved, although the people he knew in this situation were “doing okay” after marriage. His disapproval stemmed from the couple’s lack of self-restraint. Mr. Murai knew of several such matches, one that ended in divorce, but the rest are happy enough. He also told me that most people who announce they are having a shotgun wedding are not unhappy about it, and that it is not anything particularly remarkable. “There is no bad image surrounding it for most people.” Mr. Morita saw shotgun marriage as within the choice set. Indeed, recently one of his few remaining unmarried friends told him he was marrying for that reason. They had had a bet as to which would marry first. Mr. Morita felt betrayed, he noted. Mr. Nomura had a friend now in that situation, and he thought the only thing a bit sad about it is that the couple would not get to have fun together before the baby arrived. To him, there is a proper order to things: “I’m greedy.
I want not only the time of being lovers, but I want to taste the happiness of being a couple, too, and then the happiness of having a child.”

In sum, the practice of marrying due to pregnancy was well-known to these informants, who mostly saw it as unavoidable, if not entirely desirable. Maturity of the partners was raised as an issue that could make these marriages unstable. Furthermore, like Mr. Nomura, many men mentioned in the interview that it is best to have a couple of child-free years after marriage to enjoy life as a couple—before the relationship turns child-centered, as it almost inevitably does in families in Japan. With shotgun marriages making up over a quarter of all marriages today, however, we have to ask why. The rate of these marriages in all age groups doubled in the two decades since 1980; among young adults aged 20–24, it nearly tripled. The government attributes this largely to the relaxation of social norms against sexual relations before marriage. While this is no doubt a primary cause, another might be related to risk. That is, since the economy soured in 1991, taking the step to marry (and to have children, since they go hand in hand) seems to require a leap of faith. Women don’t want to marry men who are not in regular employment, and income and occupation are increasingly important factors. 91 Women’s parents, too, often have high expectations. There is nothing like a pregnancy, however, to push a couple and their parents into a decision—either it’s to abort or marry. Indeed, this was the case with Mr. Tachibana’s marriage, whose wife’s parents were of a higher social class and only grudgingly accepted the union after they learned of the pregnancy. Mr. Tachibana at the time of his marriage was twenty-one years old and heavily into his car hobby. They did not approve of him, but they did approve of the marriage. Raising a child on one’s own is the last resort for most people. And abortion, as discussed below, is accepted, but reluctantly so. Mr. Tachibana remarked that what the Japanese call dekichattakon (shotgun marriage) is a kind of opportunity in today’s world. No doubt that is the reason for the rising trend in it—perhaps it is the only way for some couples to put their fears of inadequacy or ill-preparation to rest and take the leap. In this environment, people cope as best they can as they envision and enact the family.

UNWED MOTHERS AND ABORTION

At about 2 percent of all births, Japan’s rate of extramarital birth is very low. I wondered how my informants felt about such births, and also, in conjunction with that, how they viewed abortion as an option to an undesired pregnancy.

Men’s Views of Unwed Mothers and Abortion

First, let us consider the responses of the single men:

Mr. Morita thought that an unmarried woman should not give birth, both because there would be a lot of social opprobrium and gossip, and also because money would be tight. “Pitiable” (kawaisō) is a term my informants used in reference to children born in such circumstances. If someone he knew were to get pregnant without being married, he guessed he would advise her to abort. Another aspect mentioned is that a child should have two parents. Mr. Nomura said: “It’s unnatural. Because I have the image that a child has two parents and ties the houses [the family lines of the two families] together.” When I asked him if abortion would be better, he replied, “It’s pitiful to make a child walk a painful path on account of parents’ vicissitudes, so I think there is a reason [for abortion].” Mr. Murai had a difficult time answering this question. He
said we get the situation of unwed mothers because the man has walked away from his responsibilities. He thinks that men try to escape easily, making babies without thinking about the consequences. He said that people say that the life of an unwed mother is lonely and pitiable, but he thinks such thinking is rude, although in truth he also feels sorry for them. Mr. Kondo thought that the child of an unwed mother would feel sad to see other children in the park, playing with their parents. He thought it would be hurtful.

Mr. Sudo, married with two children, noted that unwed mothers “are a disgrace.” He continues, “It’s okay if you have a baby after you marry, but to have one that seems like you made an error… you couldn’t manage yourself well, and so you ended up having a baby.” While he disapproved strongly, he did not advise abortion, but rather noted that it would be pitiful for the child to be aborted. Instead, one should take responsibility and raise the child. Mr. Isehara, father of two children, noted that he would not encourage having a baby out of wedlock because the child would be pitiable. He mentioned that a child needs both parents, as each parent provides something different to the child. There were two interviewees who had more positive opinions. Mr. Nagamune, the political aide and father of one, approved without hesitation, noting that France has a high rate of common law marriage, and Japan should follow suit. Mr. Tachibana was pragmatic and nonjudgmental in his reply, saying that he didn’t see anything wrong with it, and that there is nothing one can do about it in any case. Although he did not know anyone in that situation, he did know divorcees with small children. Furthermore, unlike the shotgun weddings, only one of the men I interviewed knew someone who had given birth out of wedlock.

As we see from the above responses, most of the men I interviewed had strong reservations about unwed motherhood; Mr. Nagamune, the secretary to the politician, who was well aware of the policy implications of Japan’s low birthrate, was the only man to give this lifestyle approval. As for abortion, most of the men expressed reluctance and distaste for it, though some of them
felt that it would be preferable to bringing a child into a world that was stacked against them. Unlike North America and many countries in Europe, social norms in Japan have not changed to embrace single parenthood.

Women’s Views on Unwed Mothers and Abortion

The women I interviewed by and large expressed similar viewpoints to the men, although some were a bit more willing to let women decide if they have the confidence to raise a child on their own. Ms. Kishino thought that it is better for a child’s education to have two parents. She also mentioned social reprobation: “Nowadays it is more common, but the eyes of society used to be quite harsh on these [children and mothers], and people don’t think it’s a very good thing.” She also doubted whether single mothers could raise their children well, and she questioned their lack of prudence in getting pregnant in the first place. In that sense, her thinking is similar to Mr. Sudo’s above, who noted that having a baby out of wedlock is a sign of a lack of self-management. Ms. Kishino was not willing to say whether she felt abortion would be preferable to having a child out of wedlock. Instead, she told me that if one had the confidence to raise the child alone, she thought it would be okay to go ahead and give birth.

Mrs. Watanabe was relatively open-minded, stating that she thinks unwed mothers have made a courageous decision, launching into parenthood without any help from the other partner. One has to deal with (mukiau) the child for sixteen years, but with no husband to share that pressure. Knowing how difficult it would be, yet still taking on [the responsibility of] raising the child whose life you were endowed with (sazukatta inochi), requires courage. As for abortion, she thought it was a sad choice, but few people would say that abortion is absolutely wrong. Yet one’s parents and others would see it as a very shameful thing, because [it signifies] a lack of self-control. It is instructive that Mrs. Watanabe used the vocabulary “sazukatta inochi,” which implies that the child was given to one by the kami, hence the reluctance to abort it. Yet, I have also been told that some people just use the term because it is in vogue, without really thinking about the religious undertone, so we should probably not over-interpret.

Ms. Uchida discussed the difficulties of unwed mothers trying to both work and raise a child, but she did not think that people nowadays pity them (although other interviewees would disagree with this assessment). She personally knows two such mothers, both of whom are doing well. Mrs. Kase, who is divorced and who is raising her children with her parents, thought that single motherhood is one style of family that can work, as long as the mother has the confidence to raise the children. She also noted that nowadays some women have the economic wherewithal to raise children without making them suffer poverty (which is true, but only in a minority of cases). To Mrs. Kase, the decision to abort or not should be up to the woman, as she is the one who gives birth and who would always know that she had gotten pregnant accidentally (muishikitekini).

Mrs. Takemoto was pretty harsh in her assessment of women who have children without marriage. She said: “If one’s partner intends to marry you, it’s okay [to get pregnant]. Otherwise, it’s wrong to make a baby. It’s rash, thoughtless, giving birth without taking responsibility. The child would be pitiable. They would suffer. If you had an abortion, of course that’s [not so good] and it would be depressing, but if you went ahead and gave birth, it’s obvious that you’d make the child have hardships, both economically and—to give birth even without the father, as one would think—you would make the child suffer more hardship than if she had both parents together.”
Mrs. Sakai echoed Ms. Kishino in wondering whether a child could really be raised well by just one parent. She felt that a child needs both parents to play different roles, one to discipline, one to encourage. She was also concerned that government support is inadequate to support single motherhood. As single mothers would have to work, they would thus lack time for the child, which would be a negative factor. She did think mothers could manage if the grandparents were there to assist, however. She skirted the abortion question by saying that the unwed mothers she knew had already had the child—she saw them when she was a pediatric nurse. The biggest problem with these births, she said, was that the mothers were young, eighteen or nineteen. They had not planned to get pregnant, and had been drinking and chain-smoking for the first few months of the baby’s life. She saw several cases where babies were born in poor health and fathers did not want to accept it, so the couple parted (and the women became single mothers).

Finally, Ms. Kamiya shared some accounts of women she knew who never married and had a child, as well as women who married, had a child, and then divorced. Each of the unwed mothers had gotten pregnant, broken up with her boyfriend, but decided to go ahead with the birth and raise the child at home with her own parents. She noted that in such cases, if the grandparents are healthy, it works out somehow, but as the years go by the costs to raise a child rise. Just at the point when one needs to spend more time with the child, one has to work in order to get income. In this sense, it’s very hard for a woman to raise a child on her own, in her view. This echoes the opinion of the nurse, Mrs. Sakai. When I asked Ms. Kamiya whether any of these women received financial support from their boyfriends, she said that it was perhaps possible if he agreed to it, but if he were young he wouldn’t have much money. Furthermore, many women break up without telling their boyfriends about the pregnancy. She also has friends who have had abortions. Some of them consult their boyfriends first, but her friends who are strong-willed decide on their own and go to the hospital on their own. But if they abort, they regret it terribly, she noted. They feel they have done something pitiful. Sometimes they eventually tell the boyfriend, and in that case, he might say he wished she had informed him before aborting. It’s all very difficult. She thought they probably should have consulted somebody in advance, but girls who are working hard in Tokyo are kind of isolated, so they just decide themselves. Ms. Kamiya said she knew a few women like that.

Interestingly, Ms. Kamiya said that if she became pregnant accidentally, she would not want an abortion unless she could not possibly avoid it. This is because she thinks she cannot get pregnant easily and would not want to lose her chance to have a baby. She told me that women who work really hard [like herself] have many gynecological problems, which she attributed to stress. She explained that stress causes a rise in testosterone, which leads to irregular menstrual cycles. “Everybody commutes to the ob-gyn, and not many women have normal menstrual cycles anymore….The ob-gyn clinic is terribly crowded. It’s an illness of our times (gendaihyou).”

Like many of my interviewees, she told me that marrying after pregnancy is fine if you had planned to get married anyway. However, if that had not been the plan, and the father had no interest in raising the child, Ms. Kamiya thought it would be better to abort (with regret) and instead become pregnant by a man who appeared to be a good candidate for marriage and fatherhood.

What can we conclude from these comments on pregnancy before marriage, unwed motherhood, and abortion? The first conclusion would be that if the pregnancy arises from two mature people who are willing to raise a child together, dekichattakon has become more acceptable, although a few interviewees still found it distasteful because of the lack of self-control involved. The ability
to plan and to forbear is a sign of maturity and uprightness of the individual. Hasty marriages between immature couples who have no taste for raising a child, however, are to be avoided because such marriages are thought to lead to divorce.

The interviewees’ comments on single motherhood are in concurrence with the findings of the sociologist Ekaterina Hertog. Most of her interviewees thought single motherhood should be avoided, if possible, because it was perceived to be a tough future for both mother and child. Hence, although abortion is not favored as an easy solution to an unwanted pregnancy by my interviewees, it is seen as a pragmatic if unfortunate option by many of them, to avoid poverty and social opprobrium. Poverty among unwed mothers can be attributed to inadequate government support and lack of decent job opportunities for women who wish to reenter the workforce.

In general, government policies for children of single parents are not generous. Japanese single mothers have the highest poverty rate (51 percent), but also the highest employment rate, in the OECD. That is, they have to work, but their wages are pitifully low. My interviewees’ negative assessments of life as the child of an unwed mother surely reflect knowledge of their difficult circumstances.

Finally, Ms. Kamiya’s comments about conception difficulties being an illness of modernity were insightful. Looking into perceived links between infertility, work, and stress might be a fruitful avenue for research. Ms. Kamiya is not the only person who brought up this topic. Mrs. Watanabe also told me that she was quitting her company to study to become a medical doctor because she wanted to help people with infertility problems.

A fortunate working mother who got her child into public daycare does drop-off duty in the early morning. A new urban rumor: some even divorce husbands, then re-marry, in order to gain priority. Another rumor: companies offering falsified employment verification for daycare seekers have sprung up. Such rumors indicate the level of anxiety over this issue.
THE FAMILY OF MY DREAMS...

Japan, like most post-industrialized societies, has a low rate of fertility due to complex intertwining factors, including the rise of women’s educational achievements, less marriage and late marriage, economic doldrums, gender discrimination in the labor market coupled with long hours of work in regular employment, a strong social responsibility of mothering, and lingering notions of the social obligations to the extended family that marriage brings to the yome, or bride in the patriline. Hardly a day passes in Japan without the media discussing some aspect of the problems people face juggling parenting and work, educating their children, or keeping them from harm. The total fertility rate has been decreasing steadily since a peak in 1973 of 2.14 births, and the government began to become alarmed at the steady decrease in 1989. That year, the total fertility rate fell to 1.57, which was 0.1 lower than the 1.58 rate of 1966’s “Year of the Fire Horse,” when couples avoided pregnancy for fear of giving birth to an overly feisty baby girl (see Figure 9). The current total fertility rate hovers at just over 1.4, which is still far from population replacement level. In opinion surveys, however, the majority of young people say they do want to marry and they want at least two children. Given this context, I asked how these youngish adults viewed the project of having and raising a child: Why do people have them? What timing is best? What makes a good parent? How should children be brought up? Are there gender differences in rearing children? What is their opinion of the current environment for having and rearing children?

Both the women and men interviewed desired children, who were seen as a source of joy, carriers of one’s genes on into history, a sign of love and trust in the future, proof that one has lived properly, an antidote to loneliness, and a source of help in one’s old age. Both women and men also hoped for partners who would listen to them, assist them emotionally and vice versa, and join in raising the children together. Of my interviewees, the one most hesitant to imagine that she might one day have a child was Ms. Uchida, who was worried that people have to reach a point where they are willing to orient their lifestyle around the child, and she did not know if she could reach that point. Children obstruct one’s pace, she noted. A general opinion was that with marriage and children, one loses private time and space.

To my interviewees, the good parent is one who listens and fosters the child’s desires, and respects their subjectivity. Interestingly, they did not think it was the parents’ job to provide heavy occupational guidance. To them, good parents provide their children with opportunities, show them proper role models, and instruct them in the rules of society. Most people wanted two children and said that a child needs two parents to be raised well.

Raising children was seen as a very serious responsibility, both economically and morally. As Mr. Nomura put it, “…until a child becomes an adult, you are responsible for what kind of person they become.”

While children were desired, however, the interviewees did not see Japan as a favorable environment in which to raise children.

First, to the single men. Cram-school teacher Mr. Morita emphasized in his reply that couples have children because they love each other, but if they do not want to have children, it is because they don’t want to take responsibility for raising them properly. Like most interviewees, he felt that waiting a year or two before childbirth would be optimal for newlyweds. To him, the good parent is one who can widen a child’s potential, encourage his or her dreams, and listen. A father should be strict and provide a model to live by. It’s also the father’s role, he noted, to be the
disciplinarian, but he should not be overly harsh. To Mr. Kondo, the young defense employee, people have children for the future, for descendants. Children also act as motivators for their parents: “If you have them, you can do any sort of difficult job.” He believed that they bring cheer to life. For timing, he noted that waiting awhile after marriage would be best, but if they come right away, that would not be an issue. It is best to have children when one is young, but he pointed out that because he is already twenty-three, it doesn’t look like he will settle down until twenty-seven or twenty-eight at the earliest. If couples do not want children, it is due to problems such as lack of income, job instability, or some kind of household problem. His notions of the good parent are similar to those of Mr. Morita: one who takes the responsibility to raise the child and meet its needs, gives the child values, teaches the child to have dreams and hopes, and helps them learn to think flexibly.

Mr. Murai, the restaurateur, told me that children are an education in life and part of life’s experience. He noted that those who don’t want children usually cite economic reasons, but he thinks there is more to it than that. In other words, people feel pressured to come up with some acceptable reason for not wanting a child, since having children is normative. Some people he knows have had a child but don’t like children, and this he can’t understand. He feels that having a child would make him feel he had to be more responsible. Finances are the key to determining when he can marry and start a family. In terms of the timing, he prefers to have his first child after two years of marriage in order to have fun as a couple first.

As for the good parent, Mr. Murai said the stable parent is the good parent, one who does

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**Figure 9. The picture of low-low fertility**

Below-replacement fertility has continued for decades.

![Graph showing the number of children per woman from 1970 to 2010](http://www.ipss.go.jp/p-info/e/psj2012/PSJ2012.asp)

not quit his job. Moreover, parents have a responsibility to show their children the work they do, and to make the children yearn to strive to model their parents’ habits when they enter their own occupation. The phrase Mr. Murai and many Japanese people use is “ko ha oya no senaka wo mite sodatsu” (“children grow up watching their parents’ backs”).

Finally, Mr. Nomura believed that children are proof that you lived properly, and they connect you to the next generation. He saw them as providing parents with a feeling of accomplishment if they grow to become good people, living happily. Without children, a couple would be lonesome. He thought that people who don’t want children are worried about the costs, and he discussed how carefully one must save to afford the expenses involved—purchasing property for a single-family dwelling, for instance, as his boss at work did. He pointed out that his boss has a working wife, but it still took time before they had enough saved to purchase a home and then start a family. For him, the right time to have a child is when everything is set up financially. He also stated that people who really don’t want children probably don’t want to change their lifestyle. He thought it good to wait before the first baby was born in order to create memories as a couple, so that when the children eventually grow up and leave, the couple will be able to reconnect to the time when it was just the two of them: “I hear parents feel shy to be together after the child has grown up, and they don’t know what to do with each other, and the house is all quiet. So I think it’s really important to first get used to each other as a couple.”

Like the other men in this sample, Mr. Nomura thought that a parent should foster children’s ability to think for themselves, yet to also behave properly as members of society: “I think it’s the parent’s job to make them fit into society, but it’s not good to have kids that are stamped out from a cookie-cutter. To an extent you probably end up controlling the child the way you want to, but the parents’ job is to help the child to naturally build his character without stress.” He also felt certain that in raising children, having confidence in oneself as a person is the most important factor.

Of the married men, Mr. Nagamune (34), the political aide, had one child, while Mr. Isehara (38), the printing company salaryman, and Mr. Sudo (38), the engineering researcher, both had two. Mr. Tachibana (39), the self-employed mechanic from Kyoto, had three children.

According to Mr. Nagamune, people have children because of instinct, to preserve the human race. Those who don’t want children probably don’t want them because of the economic burden, which includes such factors as women having to quit their jobs when they give birth, an inadequate environment for childrearing, and waiting lists for daycare spots. Also, he noted that other people do not necessarily have a lot of understanding. That is, other people do not necessarily sympathize with those who, for whatever reason of their own, do not want children. They would consider it odd. While he knows of several couples who have been married a long time and do not have children, he does not know the reason why, but he suspects infertility may be the reason. When I asked him whether his life had changed after having a baby, he replied that it had, in that life as a couple became child-centered. This comment is one that most of the married men mentioned, and it is commonly observed as a pattern in Japanese households. What exactly does it mean? In the Japanese case, it refers to centering almost all the activities of the household around the child.

For most couples, after the children are born, there is very little going out as a couple, except perhaps to weddings or funerals, until the children are fairly mature. Although in this sample Mr. Nagamune noted that he and his wife still go out as a couple and ask her mother to babysit, this is rare. I don’t mean to suggest that becoming “child-centered” is seen as problematic. Rather,
it is accepted as part of becoming a family with children. Mr. Nagamune himself did not think there is a proper time to have one’s first child, as long as it is not so late that it would be too difficult for a woman’s body. For being a “good parent,” he thought that someone who treats the child as a human being and respects the child’s subjectivity, his ideas, is a good parent. When his parents raised him, they allowed him to make decisions for himself, without restraint. This is the kind of parent he wants to be.

When I asked him about any difficulties in being a parent, Mr. Nagamune noted that he doesn’t get to spend as much time as he would like with his friends, and that is a loss. But he does rearrange schedules with his wife in order to make some time to spend with them.

Unlike the stereotype in Japanese culture, Mr. Nagamune called himself a “friend papa,” not a “thunder papa.” He leaves the disciplining up to his wife, and the daycare center teacher scolds him for that.

Mr. Sudo felt that people have children because they are lonesome, and also because it is instinctual. Another reason is to have someone to take care of you in old age.

Although Mr. Nagamune noted that economic reasons hold people back from childbearing, Mr. Sudo actually provided some details as to how expensive this can be. He and his wife both work full-time. Daycare and educational fees alone cost them about $30,000 annually. One child is in daycare and the other in a private elementary school, whose after-school care is tied to a cram school. Although they live in a district with a well-reputed public elementary school, they decided on the private school because the public school after-school program ended at 6 pm. Furthermore, it would have been a long walk for their children.

When I asked him about how his life had changed when he became a father, he said his weekend hobbies decreased, but otherwise his life has not changed except that once in a while he has to stay home to care for his children if they get sick.

Mr. Sudo impressed me as a very orderly man, one who likes to plan. He told me that for the timing of childbirth, two years after marrying is best, depending on one’s age at marriage, as you still want to be working when the children marry. A similar comment was noted earlier from Mr. Morita, who mentioned that at age thirty-eight, he was pushing the limits of when he could still have children because of the financial outlays one must project into the future for their care. Mr. Sudo does not approve of people having children until they are economically ready and out of school (the idea of student marriages with babies made him laugh). Like many of the men above, Mr. Sudo thought that the good parent is one who allows children to do what they want when they grow up. The father, for his part, should be in a solid profession, and he should be a model for the child. His childrearing style, he told me, is similar to that of his parents: allow the children to freely do as they like when they are young, and help stretch their potentials.

Now let us consider the married men in blue-collar work. Of the two men, Mr. Isehara has far more income, as he works for a large firm and his wife is employed as a public servant (day-care teacher). Mr. Tachibana, on the other hand, is self-employed in his one-man shop and his wife works only part-time. Both men had shotgun marriages, but Mr. Isehara’s occurred after age thirty, while Mr. Tachibana was only twenty-one years old.

Mr. Isehara’s narrative showed how much he enjoyed his two children. When I asked him why people have children, he replied that it is more fun to have them. If people don’t want kids, it is probably because they aren’t good with them, or feel awkward interacting with them, and so they don’t like them—he knows one woman like this. Mr. Isehara also mentioned that with children,
married couples try harder to stay together. This echoes an old saying in Japan, that children are the lynchpins (of marriage). When he and his wife argue, he noted, they settle their difference quickly if the children are there. Although he didn’t know any men who don’t want children, he did know men his age, as well as younger men, who had closed the door on marriage after being unsuccessful at finding a partner.

Because he and his wife had a shotgun wedding, the arrival of a child meant that Mr. Isehara’s life became more stable and regulated. Whereas previously he had lived at home but always stayed out having fun with friends or girlfriends, with a wife and baby on the way, he had to settle down. In terms of timing, many people wait a year before trying to get pregnant, he observed, but he and his wife did not have that option.

The good parent, to Mr. Isehara, is the one who cherishes his family. His parents were like that. In his own family, his wife does most of the disciplining and he follows up if need be. He wants his children to become people who are passionate about what they do, no matter what it is.

Like Mr. Sudo, Mr. Tachibana mentioned that people have children because it is instinctual, and also because children are just adorable. But those who do not want them, he noted, are probably thinking about the realities: the loss of freedom and the effort they take. Although their first child was not planned, they did plan the second so that the first child would not be lonely (an oft-noted reason to have another child). His third child was also planned, as he wanted a daughter, but they ended up having another boy. They decided that three children were enough. Although he had his children earlier than most men do, he noted that this meant they are now leaving the nest when he is still relatively young and free to do many things. While other men tell him they look forward to being able to drink with their sons, Mr. Tachibana is not a drinker. He just hopes to be friends with his children. Currently, however, his oldest son is going through a rough patch. He has dropped out of high school and is staying home, playing video games, and doing odd jobs as a “freeter.”

He wants his son to get a license of some sort and take on a proper job, but so far his son has not taken the initiative. It was clear that Mr. Tachibana was terribly anxious about his son’s precarious situation, as well he might be. Young men without at least a high-school credential have a very difficult time finding decent employment in Japan’s economy, let alone eventually finding a marriage partner. It is very difficult to get launched in life without credentials in Japan’s “educational credentialist” society, as sociologists have clearly illustrated.

The good parent, to Mr. Tachibana, is the one who carries through with what he says he is going to do, and acts responsibly, as a model. He uttered the same phrase as Mr. Nomura, above: children learn by watching their parents as models.

To Mr. Tachibana, the most worrisome thing about raising children is that they might cause trouble for others. In his family, his wife will scold first, but if the children do not listen, she asks him to take charge. Mr. Tachibana said that if he has to tell the children something three times, he will slap them in the face. Children, he noted, should think of their parents as scary, at least until they are independent. Otherwise, one doesn’t know what path they will veer onto.

What really stands out about these opinions, taken together, is that they all emphasize the heavy responsibilities and sacrifices of parenthood, as well as the pleasures to be enjoyed. Furthermore, it struck me that none of the parents thought that children should be told what sort of occupation to go into. Rather, they thought that the good parent offers children opportunities, and tries to draw out their innate potentials. In fact, the one man whose parents seem to have been quite controlling about their children’s education and lifestyles, Mr. Morita, even now harbors strong
resentment against them for it. There are some differences between the narratives of working-class men and white-collar men, but a larger sample would be needed to come to conclusions. The men were also keenly aware of the economics of parenthood. Mr. Sudo discussed the costs of private school for his two children, and Mr. Morita noted he would need to marry soon, or else how could he afford to send his children through university before he retired? Mr. Tachibana, the self-employed mechanic, however, would be satisfied if his son could graduate from high school, get a license to practice a skill, and have a regular job. He wanted to support his eldest son as much as possible, but I could sense his realistic assessment of what it takes to make it in Japan. His anger about this spilled into our discussion of the job market, which I will save for a future report. As Mr. Isehara’s children are much younger than Mr. Tachibana’s, it is difficult to say what his opinion is of their life chances, but because he has a relatively good household income, he may be able to offer his children educational opportunities that Mr. Tachibana could not afford.

In sum, I came away from these interviews with a sense that these men maintained fairly conservative views about parenthood, with most of them noting how, as a man, one needs to be fully prepared for the responsibility, both emotionally and financially. The family of their imagination was a two-parent heterosexual couple raising at least two children, and many favored only part-time work for the wife so that the children could be given more intensive mothering.

Like the men, some women also mentioned that they preferred to delay having children for a couple of years after marriage so that the couple’s relationship could be solidified.

Furthermore, women also mentioned the expense of rearing children. Even Mrs. Sakai, whose husband is a physician and who was not in any financial distress, had reservations about the costs of rearing a child. The expenses she noted were clothes, paper diapers, wet wipes, toys, and play sessions for entrance to private kindergarten. If her daughter gains entrance, she will need to pay several thousand dollars for the entrance fee plus several hundred a month for tuition, as well as uniforms and supplies. She also pays for private piano lessons for her daughter. They have decided to only have one child as her daughter has a health problem that may be genetic, but if it were otherwise she wonders if she and her husband could really afford to have another. She wants to be sure she can provide her daughter with as many lessons and extracurricular activities as she wishes to have.

**LEGACY EXPECTATIONS?**

This notion of having enough financial leeway as well as time to provide children with extra lessons is one that came up in several interviews. Among the men, it will be recalled, Mr. Isehara wanted his wife to quit working far away so that she could be available to take their children to lessons. Ms. Shinjo, the accounting clerk, mentioned that when she was a child, she wished to take some lessons after school, but her family couldn’t afford it. She thought that any child who wants to take lessons should be able to. We might call this a kind of legacy expectation. That is, young adults hope to maintain or exceed the level of provision that their parents afforded them when Japan’s economy was stronger. And if they didn’t have parents who could afford these things, they suffered for it and wished they had been given the opportunities. It seems that the baseline of provision for a child of the 2000s is quite high, and young adults fear their children will be pitiful if they cannot earn enough to provide what was once considered nonessential. Perhaps, too, because this sample of people lives in urban areas, the perspective is skewed toward
a higher baseline. One doubts whether people raising children in more rural parts of Japan feel the same way about the necessity for myriad lessons.

Mrs. Sakai felt that the parent who can properly scold a child and teach the child right from wrong with consistency is the good parent. In her case, she is the one to play this role as her husband lives far away (the Sakais’ daughter’s medical condition could not be treated in the regional area where Mr. Sakai worked). When he comes home, he is the one to praise the projects their daughter has finished while he was away. But he also has the role of getting very angry if their daughter does something dangerous. “Father is the best strongman,” she noted. While this was Mrs. Sakai’s opinion of the proper role for fathers, as mentioned earlier, there was variation on this issue among the interviewees. Recall that Mr. Nagamune admitted with chagrin that the daycare center teachers chastised him for failing to be a disciplinarian. Interestingly, Ms. Kamiya, the hair stylist, remarked that if she had a boy, she thinks it would be important for a male parent to be present and to demonstrate that “I am working hard and earning for the family, and I am protecting your mother.” She has many single mothers as clients, and they tell her that their boys do not learn how to be masculine. From this comment, once again, we can see that being masculine means being able to provide for and to protect the family.

All in all, how do these youngish adults assess marriage and parenthood? I was struck by the grave and risk-averse manner with which they approached it. It is as if all of one’s ducks must be lined up before one can marry, let alone have a child. A man must have a stable job, the couple must have economic means to provide the children with opportunities, and the wife or at least grandparents must be there for the child to provide careful guidance and nourishment in the early years. Otherwise, it is quite a risk for oneself as well as for one’s child. Nowhere did I hear comments such as “it’ll work out if you love each other enough.” The two male interviewees who had had shotgun marriages, and who had known and been in love with their partners for some time before they married, were the closest to approximate this sentiment. This is not the Loggins and Messina world of 1970s California: “Even though we ain’t got money, I’m so in love with you Honey, everything will bring a chain of love” (Danny’s Song, 1971). Social demographer Noriko Tsuya writes: “…decisions regarding marriage and childbearing are likely interdependent for young Japanese women and men. Put differently, they may be delaying or forgoing marriage because they do not (yet) want to have a child.” I could not agree more.

BALANCING WORK AND LIFE: OBSTRUCTED AT EVERY TURN (HAPPÔ FUSAGARI)

The problem of work/life balance has been a policy issue in Japan since the early 2000s. Around this time, the government first began implementing—and failing to meet the targets of—the so-called “Angel Plan” to boost the birthrate by providing more daycare services to working parents. In the ensuing years, there has been much discussion in the news and hand-wringing among government officials about the long waiting lists for subsidized daycare centers in the metropolitan areas. I wanted to know what these men and women thought of the environment for rearing children, and also, whether they knew any dual-career couples who were trying to balance work and life. Public sentiment on this issue has now become so strong that an anonymous blog from a woman who failed to obtain a spot for her child in a daycare center went viral in March 2016, spurring the Abe cabinet to take emergency measures for daycare provision. One can only imagine the desperation of parents who have reached the limit of their childcare leave, yet are
told that there is no daycare center available for their child, forcing the mother to quit her job, forfeit the investment in her career, and face poor prospects for future decent employment in the internal labor market. Anger and frustration over the lack of sufficient daycare were very apparent, even at the time of my interviews in 2012–2013.104

In the interviews with these young adults, I was told that the environment for achieving “balance” is not there. Mrs. Watanabe and Mrs. Takemoto both have spouses who don’t come home until after midnight, while Ms. Kase switched to an “easier” job at her workplace, though she still puts in twelve-hour days.

When I asked Mrs. Takemoto whether it was easy to raise children today, she responded: “No, women’s burden is too high. Economically also it’s not easy. If you want to get work, you can’t find a daycare center. Every door is shut (happō fusagari). We have to do something about women’s burden, it’s too great.” Mrs. Takemoto then brought up the notion of equality: “Nowadays, everything is about equality, but even though they talk about equality, suddenly there is this huge gap between men and women, and it’s not right (okashii).” Both Ms. Shinjo and Mr. Murai mentioned prejudice at work, where managers and even fellow employees push women out when they marry or have a child.

Mrs. Takemoto’s concern may also have arisen from the disjuncture between what women are being asked to do under the economic reforms of Prime Minister Abe and what they in fact can do. That is, Abe, through his policies dubbed “womenomics,” attempts to improve the national productivity and “make women shine” by urging them to increase their labor force participation and go for promotions.105 At the same time, they must shoulder the brunt of childcare and housework, find a spot in daycare for the baby despite lengthy waiting lists, put up with a corporate culture that is unfriendly to parents, and hope that the in-laws or their own parents do not fall ill, lest they be requested to provide eldercare. Although Japan has instituted a Long-Term Care Insurance Policy (LTCI) to assist households in obtaining outside care for elders who become infirm, there are many media reports of people who cut back or quit their employment to shoulder the eldercare burden.106 I do not feel that people are confident that these programs are or will be sufficient to manage eldercare in Japan’s future.

Although there is discussion nowadays about some men being very involved in their households and doing the domestic work and childcare, Ms. Kamiya told me that disapproval of “househusbands” is still rampant, while Mr. Sudo told me that men cannot take childcare leave from the workplace as it would be totally frowned upon. I have heard the same thing from other men. While the law allows childcare leave for fathers as well as mothers, the workplace environment, including one’s mates, discourages men from taking it. Hence, men who take leave risk being put on the slow track to promotion, and they also risk damaging their personal relationships at work.

There also appears to be substantial social disapproval for working mothers who cut corners in housework. Mrs. Sakai mentioned mothers who open takeaway bags when they come home from work and call it “dinner.” Mr. Morita mentioned with disapproval a full-time worker friend who fails to make dinner for her husband.

The youngest man, Mr. Kondo, as well as the auto mechanic from Kyoto, Mr. Tachibana, both noted that they did not know any women who were trying to balance work and family. Mr. Tachibana said he did not think it would be possible to balance the two. Almost all the women he knows (including his wife) work part-time, and his sister-in-law quit her full-time job when she had a child. He also expressed a negative opinion of daycare centers, saying that they cannot
be trusted with children aged one or two. Finally, he noted the need for one parent to be home: “If the husband were a full-time househusband, then the wife could work as a regular career woman, but somebody has to take care of the household.” One can see from this comment that in Mr. Tachibana’s mind, a child must be at least three before being put in daycare. This would reflect the popular notion that children should be raised by their mother until the age of three. Although he added that a father’s full-time care as househusband would also be acceptable, this is a rare strategy in Japan, despite being the subject of television dramas.

Everyone else in the sample knew someone who was trying to achieve balance, and they all pointed to challenges these women face, including exhaustion, lack of personal time, and difficulties finding daycare. They noted that “balance” would depend a great deal on the woman’s occupation. Mr. Isehara and Mr. Sudo both are married to women who work full-time jobs; Mr. Isehara’s wife in daycare teaching, and Mr. Sudo’s wife in research. But Mr. Isehara said that his own workplace (the printing factory) employs no women at all. For a woman to keep working, he said, she needs her firm’s cooperation. Mr. Sudo mentioned that while his wife works full-time, it isn’t a traditional career in the sense of pursuing promotions into upper management. At their research institute, no married women with children wish to be promoted. He pointed to the long hours as the biggest problem. While his wife currently goes home at 7 pm, if she were promoted, she would have to stay later. Furthermore, there would be weekend work. This keeps women from desiring promotions, he implied. He thought one solution might be in-house daycare. While one man at his workplace took childcare leave, the atmosphere did not encourage it. He summed up the work environment: “The research just stops when you’re gone…it’s not the sort of job one can do at home.”

Many of the men noted that one of the biggest obstacles women face is simply the problem of finding a daycare center. They noted that the social infrastructure is totally inadequate: “There is no place to put them.” Even the single men were aware and concerned. It was obvious that Mr. Nomura, one of the single interviewees, had put a lot of thought into the topic. He said: “I think we should have a proper system of secure, safe childcare. Right now there is so much demand that companies even have to provide in-house childcare. The number of children just keeps dropping, so if we’re going to do something about it, it needs to be a public initiative. Private enterprise just would never make it, because you can’t make money at it. Only the national government can take on something with the premise that they won’t make a profit. I think it’s necessary…. If I have a child, I’d be in a panic if I couldn’t find a daycare center for him. It’s okay if they don’t care for the child all day long until late at night. At least he has to be cared for during the daytime.” Although I did not ask Mr. Nomura, it is not likely that he would approve of the privatization of public daycare centers, which has been happening since the latter half of the 1990s.

The staff in Mr. Nomura’s company had a terrible time finding daycare. The same problem was mentioned by Mr. Murai and Mr. Isehara. The latter two men were also very critical of the ways that local governments allocate funds. After discussing the problem of lack of spaces in daycare centers, Mr. Murai noted: “It is odd that in Japan, at year’s end, they suddenly rush to spend money on road construction but…I don’t get it. All they do is dig up perfectly fine roads and resurface them!” Mr. Isehara, in a separate interview, concurred: “Other places waste too much money on road construction when they should be putting it into social welfare.” Mr. Nagamune, who is involved in politics, was the most positive about people’s chances of finding daycare. He claimed it is possible to find if people do not insist on their first choice and are not fussy about the
location. However, the testimony of the others, in addition to anecdotes from many young families, belies his optimism.

None of the men thought that Japan has a good environment in which to raise children. Besides the dearth of daycare, they mentioned the costs of education, which includes the costs of private cram schools to prepare children for entrance exams, as well as the costs of basics like uniforms. They also mentioned the style of education that rests so heavily on exams and credentialism. For instance, Mr. Morita pointed to the ridiculous tuition fees for lessons in elementary and junior high, and fees for cram schools and home tutors. Since he himself was in this industry for many years, he is an expert on the costs. He suggested that the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology should change the university entrance exam to make it easy to pass (without the necessity of cram school), while universities, at the same time, should make it difficult to graduate, as in the United States.

Of all the interview accounts, it was Mr. Tachibana’s, though, that painfully revealed the class-based nature of the education game and the stark realities for people on the bottom of the “gap” society. While the other men complained about costs for cram schools and university tuition, Mr. Tachibana’s complaint was more fundamental. His son had just dropped out of a public commercial high school. From Mr. Tachibana’s account, it seems his son’s withdrawal stemmed at least partly from the cost burden this school had placed on the family for incidentals such as textbooks, uniforms, school shoes, and club activity uniforms. The uniforms alone, he noted, cost the family $1,000, while the books cost $300. Furthermore, parents were supposed to pay the costs of credentialing exams and special lectures at the school. He wished he could put his son in a private technical school that could draw out his potential, but he could not afford it. He was totally frustrated at this, and angry with what he saw as alarmingly high taxes, with the money being spent on (useless) projects such as trying to attract people back to live in the villages (machizukuri).

Finally, comments from Ms. Shinjo, who grew up in rural Saitama, were instructive. She thought that in some ways it has become easier to raise children: there are more daycare centers than in the past, more places to breastfeed, more convenient gadgets, and more involvement by fathers. But she felt that socially, the situation is more impoverished—people don’t know the neighbors, there are fewer people to consult. She spoke of childrearing neurosis and isolation. She thought that today’s children lack time to play freely, and she continued on to say that there are many people who have no psychological space or leeway: “They are always being chased by something [they have to get done].” So she saw childrearing problems as much bigger than something that more government support would solve. Her narrative points to the feelings of uncertainty and alienation that seem to have increased in the recent decades of economic decline, unstable employment, and falling birthrates.

**Conclusion**

From the narratives explored here, we can see the persistence of fairly conservative views on gender roles in marriage and on what it takes to be a parent. Both women and men were skeptical of the possibilities for “balance” in work and life, as they both tend to see men as the primary breadwinners. In these interviews, even women who want equal partnerships with their
spouses expected the man’s job to be the core, more highly paid one. Given that employers often discriminate against women workers, that daycare and after-school care for children are insufficient, and that job mismatches are common, most women, by default or by choice, end up as homemakers or secondary earners. Yet there were also more liberal views expressed by some interviewees, who were trying to achieve, or who desired at least, more equal sharing in marriage and employment.

The influence of the recessionary economy appeared often as a backdrop, especially concerning men’s thoughts on having and raising children. With such cautious views about the high level of provision necessary to successfully parent a child, it is not surprising that young people hesitate to marry. We should also bear in mind the differences in social class, as in Mr. Tachibana’s narrative. What families like the Tachibanas need are tax credits for school-related expenses and free tuition for credentialing exams for their children. Subsidized technical/vocational education post–high school would also help families such as his. Future research should look more closely at working-class people’s attitudes and strategies concerning marriage and childrearing. Recently the Abe government has seemed determined to provide some kind of scholarship assistance to needy university students, but the details of the plan have yet to be finalized. Still, university scholarships are not going to help Mr. Tachibana’s son, who needs to graduate from high school first.

We have seen through these interviews that both structural factors—the poor economy, stagnant salaries, job mismatching, a workplace culture of long hours, and lack of sufficient government support for daycare—and ideological factors such as gendered norms of the household division of labor, the notion of the yome role in a marriage, the high expectations for children’s education, and firms’ failure to retain and promote talented women, lead to struggles in family formation. In addition, as we have seen among this group of sixteen men and women surveyed, there is a gap between what some men desire out of a relationship and what some women desire. On the
one hand, some women want their own careers to be taken seriously by partners and eschew taking on the lion’s share of childrearing and household management. On the other hand, some men, both unmarried and married, desire spouses who agree to do more in the household, and who scale back on outside employment. Furthermore, this research suggests that living alone in itself disposes a person to hesitate sharing space with another person. Aware of these looming problems, some young people are reluctant to invest in a marriage with uncertain returns. The risk is too great.

This research confirms, too, that unlike many Europeans and North Americans, the notion of experimenting with family structures, such as motherhood without marriage, is not at all appealing. My informants saw considerable social stigma for those who make this choice. Only one of my informants felt that Japan should be open to any and all ways of parenthood, whether inside or outside formal marriage. The reasons they gave were both cultural and structural. Having children outside of marriage was considered pitiful, stigmatized, and unsupported by social welfare. Children should have two parents. Marriage as a social institution still carries cultural weight, backed as it is by the tax system and corporate welfare, as well as by the household registration system. This is far different from the situation in some societies of “second modernity,” where the so-called normal family “has lost much of its force.” In these societies, “normalization of diversity” is the second modernity of the West, where “the clearly prescribed order of old has given way to a variety of trajectories and models.” In Japan, one gets the feeling that the old models remain and that people still desire them, but because they cannot meet the bar—or because the old model is incompatible with other desires, such as career plus marriage for women—they remain single and childless. Unlike in Europe, too, new models do not meet with thick social welfare supports.

While the young adults in my sample are living in precarious times, we should not assume that they have retreated from life and are unwilling to forge their own paths. Many of the single interviewees are seeking to marry and have children—enacting their visions of family life—while the married couples have jumped into parenthood. I have not yet been able to do extensive follow-up interviews, but even with this small sample, we can see youngish adults acting on their dreams and taking risks, both in their careers and their family lives. As noted earlier, Mrs. Watanabe quit her salaried position as a regular employee at a large firm in order to study for medical school; she subsequently had an unplanned pregnancy and, a year later, was desperately trying to study for the medical school entrance exam while acting as sole caregiver for the baby. Mr. Murai and his business partner borrowed money to start their own restaurant, and Mr. Murai recently married, although not to the partner he had in 2012; Ms. Kamiya studied abroad and in Japan, and worked long hours in a very low-paid apprenticeship to become a haircutter; Ms. Uchida pursued a highly personally fulfilling yet unstable path in avant-garde theatre; Mr. Nomura plans to marry in the autumn of 2016, having found a partner who shares his interests in trains; and Mrs. Takemoto quit her part-time job, moved to the suburbs, and now has two toddlers.

Though it may take more effort and more luck to be “ready” in today’s economy, these interviewees are actively engaging with life and assessing their options carefully as they go. I hope to do a follow-up study to see where their opportunities and their choices lead, and what sorts of relationships they forge as they enact the futures they envision.

I asked at the outset of this report whether Japanese young adults have given up on the notion of marrying and having children, whether the institution of marriage carries less weight than it
once did, whether norms surrounding marriage and having children have loosened. The accounts of the interviewees have demonstrated that the institution of marriage is still robust, people still think of marriage and having children as a package, and ideas about what it takes—economically, in terms of provision, but also emotionally, in terms of sacrifice, to greater or lesser extent, of individual pursuits or personal “space”—remain fairly strong. While social stigma around co-habitation has lessened, having a child out of wedlock remains sanctioned by society. Gender roles surrounding marriage—the “breadwinner” husband, the wife who manages the household and childcare—also remain strong, although a weaker economy has made some men unable to marry at all, while others want their wives to work. It is worthwhile to remember that this “breadwinner model,” after all, is still given a favored status in the tax code. A globalized economy has made some women pursue dreams of careers, sometimes leading to forgoing family formation, sometimes not. Neither pathway is without its difficulties, but people make their choices, a greater number of adults remain single, and families evolve.

Where is the Japanese government in this picture? The Japanese government faces a tough road ahead. My interviewees’ narratives show young adults who do not have a lot of confidence in the government’s ability to support their dreams of family. Even with changes in the legal environment since 1986 to improve gender equality and end discrimination in employment, inequality and workplace discrimination remain stubborn problems. Despite government campaigns to encourage men to take more proactive roles as parents and householders, changes in the legal structure to give parents paid leaves for childcare and eldercare, and campaigns to encourage companies to cut long working hours, make workplaces more “family friendly,” and increase the number of slots in daycare, we do not see much change. Although I cannot speak to specific solutions that would make Japan an easy country to raise children, I echo the sentiment that work-family policy change has been “slow, compromised and vestigial.”Apparently, more taxes need to be spent. Current levels have not sufficed to fully support dual-worker families. Furthermore, the corporate environment needs to change so that the culture of long working hours abates. And there needs to be more flexibility in the labor market, so that it is not made up of “insiders” and “outsiders.” Instead, people at various stages of their lives should be able to enter and exit the labor market, in full-time or part-time work, confident that their skills will be properly evaluated. This way, the stigma of an irregular job would lessen, as it would not necessarily mean poverty. Furthermore, those women who want to care for their own children when the children are young—and this is a strong norm in Japan—could do so without being forever penalized with marginal and low-paying jobs. There was a policy discussion recently surrounding equal pay for equal work, but this principle could easily be side-stepped, however, by ensuring that the job contents of “irregular” and “regular” employees have absolutely no overlap. In other words, it sounds good but I suspect that in reality ways would be found to minimize its effect on the system. Somehow the huge divide between irregular and regular employees needs to be lessened.

The government can take heart from the fact that young people actually want to have children, or at least many do. The problem is that they do not see the current environment as a friendly one in which to have children. “Obstructed at all turns” is not an endorsement of government policy to date. One feels that until these contradictions get sorted out, the birthrate is not likely to rise. All three major candidates in Tokyo’s gubernatorial election of August 2016 committed themselves strongly to reform in the provision of childcare. Whether the chosen candidate,
Koike Yuriko, will be able to translate her promise into reality will be of great interest to young urban families.

What needs to change in order to give more leeway to young adults to pursue their dreams? There must be reform in the employment system, to reduce the inequality between irregular and regular employees. Furthermore, the culture of long working hours will have to change, if men and women are to be communicative and companionate marriage partners to each other. Another factor is the chronic shortage of daycare and eldercare facilities in urban areas; this calls for substantial government fiscal support at a heretofore unprecedented level, in order to meet the demand during a time of the rapid aging of society and the demographic decline. If the government gave more financial support to single-parent families, too, the stigma surrounding them could lessen to some extent. And there is something else. At present it feels as if the force of conservative values often wins out over the force for diverse ways of living, which may at least partly explain why Angel Plans have been made but inadequately funded, or targets for an increase in the number of female managers have been made by the government, only to be scaled back, and legislation for men as well as women to take parental leave has been passed, yet it is taken by only a tiny fraction of men, or a female legislator is heckled by a male colleague, saying she should get married when she attempts to put forth a proposal for more childcare facilities in her district. The voices of my informants tell me that things have changed, and I believe them. But conservative forces also remain strong, and some of my interviewees indeed espouse a contradictory mix of conservative and liberal views, which is not necessarily surprising. The same thing is true of the government. Above all, they expressed hopes that in the future, their dreams for family will be able to be realized. And while those families will not look the same as those in the West, they will certainly evolve in ways that make sense in the contexts of Japan.

The larger parameters—demographic decline, aging, fragile economies that fail to produce enough decent jobs for young adults, increased gender equality but also resistance to it, growing social inequality—these are shared by much of East and West alike. But the devil is in the details.
More on the Project

Note: Salaries are converted at the rate of 100 yen per dollar.

PROFILES OF INTERVIEWEES

Single Men

Mr. Kondo (23), 2 younger brothers, high-school grad. Transitioning from defense-related to service-sector employment. Grew up in Tochigi, where his grandparents raised him. Self-proclaimed “old fashioned” in values. Plans to go abroad, learn English, and eventually work in a grounds crew at the airport. Earns $10,000–$20,000 per annum.

Mr. Morita (38), 1 older sister, college grad, unemployed with spotty cram-school teaching career. Grew up in many places, father was a salaried employee. No income at present. Lives alone.

Mr. Murai (31), single child, college grad, entrepreneur with restaurant/bar in Tokyo; has girlfriend, from Tokyo; parents were both career salaried employees. Income is in the $30,000–$50,000 range. Lives with co-owner.

Mr. Nomura (32), only child, college grad. Regular employment in optical sales, small firm. Grew up in Saitama. Father was a salaryman, mother was a homemaker. Loves his job and train hobby. Lives with parents. Earns $20,000–$30,000 per annum.

Married Men

Mr. Isehara (38), from Saitama, high-school grad, 2nd son, salaryman at large printing factory; father, college grad, worked in same firm. Mother worked part-time. Married for 8 years to wife who is a full-time daycare teacher, 2 children ages 4 and 8. Personal income is $50,000–70,000 per annum.

Mr. Nagamune (34), from Tokyo, 2nd son of 3, both parents held career jobs. Works as political aide, married 5 years to regular-employee wife, 1 child age 4. Earns $30,000–50,000 per year.

Mr. Sudo (36), grew up in Ishikawa, 1 older sister, father was public servant and mother worked in banking. Works in research facility as an engineer (materials science and engineering), married 9 years to a fellow researcher, 2 children ages 3 and 7. Earns $70,000-100,000 per annum.

Mr. Tachibana, (39), from Kyoto, high-school grad, 2nd son with older sister, self-employed auto mechanic; parents had a construction business. Married 17 years to wife who works part-time in school cafeteria. They have 3 sons, 12, 13, and 16. Personal income is $20,000–30,000 per annum.

Single Women

Ms. Kamiya (27), from Tochigi, 1 younger brother, has beautician’s license; mother is a nurse, father is a salaryman. Went to London for 1 year post-graduation and then returned to Tokyo
with boyfriend, with whom she lives. Now working as a regular employee to obtain skill at haircutting. Salary is $10,000–$20,000 per annum.

**Ms. Kishino** (29), from Aomori, raised in an extended family with her father an adopted son-in-law. (Her mother had no male siblings, so her mother, as elder daughter, married a man who took on the Kishino family name, and became the successor to the Kishino family. Ordinarily the expected successor would have been the eldest son of the Kishino family. In such cases, the adopted son-in-law, (*mukoyōshi*) is in a structurally weak position in the household). Her father now drives taxi, mom works in eldercare. Came to Tokyo at age 19, had various office jobs, is now unemployed.

**Ms. Shinjo** (27), from Saitama, with 1 younger brother. Her parents had a plumbing business; her mother is a cleaner part-time. Post–high school, she obtained a computer systems admin certificate from a 1-year government program. Earns between $20,000–$30,000 as a full-time programmer.

**Ms. Uchida** (33), from Yamaguchi, a university graduate with 1 older brother. Father was an adopted son-in-law; mother returned to school for teaching license and became the breadwinner, as father did not have stable employment until age 40. Takes contract work as an art installer, but her passion is avant-garde theater. Income is $10,000–$20,000.

**Married and Divorced Women**

**Ms. Kase** (35), divorced, university educated. Raised in Hong Kong, no siblings. Father was in tourist business. Worked continuously in a foreign capital firm in Tokyo, where she is now a VP. Lives with her 2 children at her parents’ residence in Tokyo. Her annual income is over $100,000.

**Mrs. Sakai** (29), university educated, from Tokyo, 1 older sister. Mother is a full-time nurse, father is an engineer. She married a doctor, who lives apart while she lives with her parents and raises her toddler; the child has a serious illness. Currently a professional housewife. Family income is over $100,000.

**Mrs. Takemoto** (27), from Aichi, 2nd of 3 sisters. Parents had a tea business. A university graduate, she had 2 part-time jobs after marriage, earns about $10,000–20,000 per annum. Quit her regular job in kimono sales to marry a salaryman architect.

**Mrs. Watanabe** (28), from Tokyo, 1 older brother, parents both worked—mother as a teacher, father in auto sales. University graduate who worked 7 years in a large firm but quit to try to enter medical school. At time of interview, unemployed and studying. In 2014, still studying for the entrance exam while raising a (surprise) baby.
Related Work on the Family in East Asia

Throughout most of the industrial and post-industrial world, changes in marriage, fertility, and child rearing over the past half century have had profound effects on public policy and family life, ranging from the fiscal viability of government-run old-age pension schemes to the well-being of children. These family behavioral changes have occurred in a context of major structural changes in economies, education systems, and other institutions.

Researchers in this collaborative project examine attitudes and behavior in areas of education, marriage and cohabitation, divorce, childbirth, childcare, employment, and relationships with parents and children, using national survey data from Japan, South Korea, other Asian countries, and the United States.

This research was partially funded by a grant from the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.


**SOUTH KOREA**


**CHINA**


Endnotes

1 See Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, “Families in a Runaway World,” 507.

2 See Kelly, “At the Limits of New Middle-Class Japan.”

3 See Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, “Families in a Runaway World.”

4 Ibid., 511.

5 White, Perfectly Japanese: Making families in an era of upheaval.

6 The quantitative study, conceived by Minja Choe, Larry Bumpass, Noriko Tsuya, and Ronald Rindfuss, probed attitudinal change on “innovative” or “nontraditional” behaviors in contemporary Japan. They used cross-sectional and longitudinal data from Japan for 1994, 2000, and 2009 (National Survey on Work and Family Life–NSWFL and National Survey on Family and Economic Conditions–NSFEC) to assess the extent and direction of attitudinal change in regard to nontraditional behaviors such as premarital sex, cohabitation, childbirth out of wedlock, and divorce. The three main areas they queried were: (1) the centrality of marriage and childbearing, (2) nontraditional family behavior, and (3) the wife’s employment and the family (Choe et al., “Nontraditional Family-Related Attitudes in Japan,” 249). While the direction of change in attitudes toward the family in the three periods studied has leaned to the nontraditional, the authors found a leveling off in the trend since 2000 (Ibid., 254). Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that the trend of the future will still be a move toward nontraditional attitudes.


8 See Brinton, “Christmas Cakes and Wedding Cakes.”

9 See Salamon, “Male Chauvinism as a Manifestation of Love in Marriage”; Lebra, Japanese Women; Imamura, Urban Japanese Housewives; Iwao, Japanese Woman.

10 See Mathews, What Makes Life Worth Living? and “Being a Man in a Straïtened Japan.”

11 See Fu, An Emerging Non-Regular Labor Force in Japan; Osaka et al., “Precarious Work in Japan.”


13 Helen Macnaughton points out that Japanese women’s participation rate is rather low in comparison to other advanced nations—for instance, 57.7 percent the US, 56.9 percent in the UK, and 57.7 percent in Singapore (Macnaughton, “Womenomics for Japan”).

14 Female employees may take paid maternity leave of six weeks before and eight weeks after childbirth, as stipulated in the Labor Standards Law of 1947. In addition, the Childcare and Eldercare Leave Law of 1995 now gives women the right to take up to one year of partially subsidized leave for the birth of a child, up to one year, two months if the father also took leave, and up to one year, six months if a daycare center could not be found in time to return to work. The law was revised and expanded several times over the years, most recently in 2009. See Japan Association for Women’s Education, “kī wā-do, yōgo kaisetsu.”

15 See Stone, Opting Out?

16 See Osawa, “Twelve Million Full-Time Housewives.”


18 See Osawa et al., “Precarious Work in Japan”; Kojima, “Why Do Temp Workers Work as Hard as They Do?”


20 See Rosenbluth, The Political Economy of Japan’s Low Fertility.

21 See Kawano, Roberts, and Long, Capturing Contemporary Japan.


24 See Charlebois, “Herbivore Masculinity as an Oppositional Form of Masculinity.”

25 See Mizukoshi et al. “Japan’s *Ikumen* Discourse.”

26 I gave the participants a rundown of what we saw as the stereotypical salaryman of the postwar period, as learned from books, films, etc. The profile includes long work hours, after-work socializing with colleagues, long commutes, little time at home, little participation in household chores, socializes with workmates and friends more than as a couple, wants wife to take complete responsibility for raising children, does not overtly express love for his wife, does not want his wife to work full time, hands over salary to his wife to manage, and has a strong allegiance to his parents and would like them to live with him (if eldest son).

27 Please refer to Appendix 1 for profiles of the interviewees. Following a person’s name, I put in parentheses his or her age.

28 See Appendix A for profiles of the interviewees.

29 See Roberts, *Staying on the Line*.


33 Ibid.

34 See Ogura, *Kekkon no Jōken*.

35 Mr. Nomura confessed to being a kind of train “otaku.” He would travel, sometimes with his parents, to distant prefectures to ride on various kinds of trains. They are for him a serious hobby.

36 See Townsend, *The Package Deal*.

37 In this household, the husband returns home on the last train, has a beer, and falls asleep. In the salaryman household, it is generally thought to be the wife’s duty to prepare a full evening meal and at least set it out for the spouse to eat upon his return, if not stay up to eat with him. I could sense some disapproval of the wife in Mr. Morita’s narrative, as she prepared food for the child but did not make efforts to cook much for herself or her husband.

38 According to the Cabinet Office (2013: 7), “A man and a woman with similar educational background tend to get married.” In the past, men tended more to marry women with lesser educational status than themselves.


40 In some ways, Mr. Ishihara resembles a more middle-class background, as his own father put himself through night school to get an engineering degree, and then worked as a research engineer in the same firm where his son now works, later climbing to department head. His mother, a two-year design college graduate, worked in a clinic as a part-timer after the children were in elementary school, but not for the money, he noted.

41 In Japan, mothers often fall asleep while putting a child to bed, because they lie down next to them on the futon.

42 See Nemoto, “Long Working Hours and the Corporate Gender Divide in Japan.”


44 See North, “Negotiating What’s ‘Natural.’”

45 See Nemoto, “Long Working Hours and the Corporate Gender Divide in Japan,” 524.

46 It was an extended family where his grandparents also helped a lot.


48 See Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan*.
In central Tokyo, there is a small market for hourly cleaning services provided by foreign residents, but it is an informal market at present, and by no means is this option available widely. The Japanese government is now launching a pilot scheme to have private firms offer domestic helper services provided by foreign workers in special economic zones, but this is not yet fully operative. (See “Utilization of Foreigners Conducting Housekeeping Services,” at http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/tiiki/kokusentoc/pdf/gaiyou_English.pdf).

See Cook, Reconstructing Adult Masculinities.

See West, Lovesick Japan.


See Tsuya, “Below-Replacement Fertility in Japan, 98.

Mrs. Sakai’s child was later diagnosed with a serious illness, which Mrs. Sakai herself largely managed, so she had a very heavy workload at home.

See Roberts, Staying on the Line.


Ibid.


Ibid., 1684.


While this level of babysitting may seem highly unusual in urban settings, it does happen, especially when the woman has a career that her parents invested in and strongly support. One woman I interviewed at a foreign capital financial services firm in 2000 (Roberts, “Globalization and Work/Life Balance” and “Similar Outcomes, Different Paths”) told me that her father came to live with her and her husband during the week for the first year of his grandson’s life. Grandpa cared for the baby while his daughter went back to work after a short maternity leave. She was not able to find a public daycare for the baby, and Grandma, who would be the normative caregiver, was already busy taking care of the children of the woman’s brother.

In my research on a foreign multinational financial services firm in Tokyo (MNC, pseudonym) from 1999–2001 (Roberts, “Globalization and Work/Life Balance” and “Similar Outcomes, Different Paths”)—as well as in my ongoing research on married women employees at a Japanese multinational manufacturing firm (Naruse, pseudonym) (Roberts, “Salary Women and Family Well-Being in Urban Japan”—I have found that grandparents’ direct support via childcare and sick child care can make a very big difference in a woman’s ability to continue her job. Some women live with or near their parents, and one woman at MNC had a retired father who commuted to live with her nuclear family during the first year of the child’s life. The woman’s parents had invested in her education and did not want to see her lose her job. Another point in common with my previous research is Mrs. Kase’s decision to move to a department with less overtime work after she returned from child-care leave. This was a strategy used by MNC women as well. But it could be a trap if the new job was less challenging, which could jeopardize her tenure at the organization or damage her career options. Some women are tempted to quit out of sheer tedium and the thought that caring for their own child at home would be more worthwhile.

See Lebra, Japanese Women.

See Salamon, “Male Chauvinism as a Manifestation of Love in Marriage.”

See Perlow, Finding Time.

See Roberts, “Pinning Hopes on Angels.”

See Roberts, “Globalization and Work/Life Balance”; Brinton and Mun, “Between State and Family.”


See Cook, “Expectations of Failure” and Reconstructing Adult Masculinities.

See Brinton, “Christmas Cakes and Wedding Cakes.”

See Aronsson, *Career Women in Contemporary Japan*.

See Nemoto et al., “Never-Married Employed Men’s Gender Beliefs and Ambivalence toward Matrimony in Japan.”

See Roberts, “Globalization and Work/Life Balance” and “Similar Outcomes, Different Paths.”

See *Japan Times*, “Ending Maternity Harassment.”


Even in the internal labor market, if one has a license such as IT skills certification or an accounting license or a scrivener’s license, etc., one can gain decent employment upon reentry into the workforce. Without such skills, however, the only opportunities will be irregular employment at very low wages.


See Bumpass et al., “The Institutional Context of Low Fertility,” 219, which cites the work of Ogawa et al.


See Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW), 2001 and 2010 reports. This rate remained at over a quarter of all births at the last time the MHLW reported this statistic from their survey of 2009.

“First strike,” referring to the way your spouse would be x’d out of your family register but remain there forever. See Alexy, *Intimate Separations* and Chapman and Krogness, *Japan’s Household Registration and Citizenship* for detailed accounts of the importance of the family registry in today’s society.

See Klinenberg, *Going Solo*.

He could not ask her to leave her mother’s house and cohabit with him, as that would leave her mother alone, something that his girlfriend was reluctant to do. There was also a ten-year age gap between him and his girlfriend, so it is doubtful that her mother was too keen on him as a marriage prospect for her daughter.

See NIPSSR, 2011, Table 4-2, 23.

MHLW data, 2014.

See Hertog, *Tough Choices*.

NIPSSR survey results, 2011.

See Hertog, *Tough Choices*.


Mr. Kondo was planning to quit his current job in order to take a dream job in Tokyo. He also wanted to go abroad to learn English. All this would take a lot of time, so he would not be marrying early. This would delay the arrival of parenthood for him.

Mr. Nomura mentions the importance of calculating one’s projected future wages in this project of marrying and having children. Wages in Japan have actually declined in the past two decades, and remain stagnant. This surely has a dampening effect on the birth rate.

“Freeters” (composed of the words ‘free’ and ‘arbeiter’ (worker) are young people between the ages of 15 and 35, who are not currently in school, who subsist on irregular employment. Housewives who work in irregular employment are not included (because ‘housewives’ already have a main occupation, as housewife). The term at first carried the notion of youth who rejected regular employment after graduation in order to follow their dreams. It became widespread after the rise in irregular employment in the 1990s and 2000s. At first many used the term pejoratively as an indication that young people were not being serious about settling down and making the transition to adulthood with stable (yet perhaps tedious) jobs. Furthermore, it
was seen as especially problematic for young men to be freeters, since they should be on the path to become responsible family men, not dilettantes. Later, scholars noted that many of these freeters actually sought stable jobs, but they were shut out of the job market in recessionary times. See, for example, Genda (2005), and Cook, (2013).

91 See Cook, Reconstructing Adult Masculinities.

92 See Brinton, Lost in Transition; Kariya, “From Credential Society to ‘Learning Capital’ Society.”

93 Causing bother (meiwaku) to others is very much frowned upon in Japan.


96 See Osaki, “Angry Blog Post Sparks Movement for Improved Day Care.”

97 Although Japan boasts a very high-quality public daycare system, with a sliding-fee scale that adjusts to the parents’ income, the demand for spaces is far greater than supply in the urban areas, especially for babies and toddlers. Licensed private daycare is also available, but it is more costly and also has waiting lists. To understand this issue in comparative political perspective, see Patricia Boling, The Politics of Work-Family Policies.

98 For a detailed report on Prime Minister Abe’s policies regarding “womenomics,” please see Macnaughton, “Womenomics for Japan.”

99 See Boling, 2015.

100 See Shirahase, Social Inequality in Japan.

101 See Tachibanaki, Kakusa shakai, nani ga mondai nanoka.


103 See Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, “Families in a Runaway World,” 505.

104 Ibid., 507.

105 See Boling, The Politics of Work-Family Policies, 137.

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About the Author

Japan’s Evolving Family:
Voices from Young Urban Adults
Navigating Change

Glenda S. Roberts

In recent decades, Japan has become a rapidly aging, low-birthrate society. Late marriage and no marriage have also become commonplace. With the prolonged recession, stable employment declined, wages dropped, and the reputation of the prototypical “salaryman” of the postwar period took a beating. In this milieu, how do young adults feel about conventional gender roles? Have attitudes changed in regard to marriage and childrearing, and if so, how? How do the unmarried envision themselves in the future, and how do the married wish to raise their children? In this interview study, diverse views can be heard, but those relating to childbearing and rearing remain fairly conservative. Furthermore, expectations that women should be solely responsible for the “double shift” of household labor and caregiving upon marriage, as well as continued discrimination against women in the workplace and a workplace culture of long hours, appear to underlie the hesitancy young adults have in acting on their dreams in the recessionary economy.