

HOW JAPANESE SINGLE MOTHERS WORK

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Abstract: Welfare support for single mothers in Japan has been subject to significant restructuring in the recent years. Whereas single mothers had received support in the form of the dependent children's allowance (*jidō fuyō teate*) in the past, reforms introduced in 2003 have aimed instead to promote single mothers' employment and make them independent from state assistance. This paper examines the working conditions of single mothers in Japan and explores the barriers they face in making this move 'from welfare to work.' Given that only few married mothers in Japan work, how do single mothers manage to balance childcare with earning a living wage? Based on statistical data and life history interviews, I investigate the problems single mothers face in balancing their children's needs with the demands of work. In examining their work histories, I highlight the role of qualifications, employment in specific job sectors, as well as the impact of motherhood on single mothers' long-term work trajectories and income. Their experience contributes not only to an understanding of the challenges of being a single parent but also of the constraints women in general face in pursuing a career and becoming economically independent from husbands, families and the state.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the Japanese government implemented major reforms, which significantly altered the character and goal of welfare support for single mothers in Japan. Whereas the dependent children's allowance (*jidō fuyō teate*), the major source of support for single mothers in postwar Japan, had protected their well-being until then, the reforms introduced a new approach, which stresses mothers' responsibility to make independent efforts to become economically independent through work (*Boshi kafu fukushi hōrei kenkyūkai* [Maternal and child welfare law research group] 2004: 151). Reforms have restricted their eligibility for cash assistance and introduced a variety of work-support programs with the goal of promoting employment for single mothers and making them economically independent from state assistance.

The restructuring of policies regarding single mothers with the emphasis on working motherhood stands in stark contrast to the long-standing protection of women as housewives and stay-at-home mothers offered by Japanese social policies (Ōsawa 1993; Shioda 2000; Yokoyama 2002). Encouraged by tax incentives, health and pension benefits, even now, the

majority of Japanese women interrupt their employment after giving birth, contributing to the well-known M-shaped work rate (Iwai and Manabe 2000). Within an environment where only few mothers of pre-school-aged children work, how do single mothers balance childcare with the demands of work? Moreover, as main breadwinners and mothers, how do single mothers manage to earn a living wage? In this paper, I examine the challenges single mothers face in balancing work and family, earning a living wage, and becoming 'independent' as anticipated by policy makers. Based on an examination of single mothers' work patterns, everyday strategies and of support policies, I investigate the barriers and opportunities associated with becoming economically independent through work.¹

Even though single mothers only represent a small minority of women, their situation has important implications for our understanding of women's work opportunities and welfare in general. The well-being of single mothers is often viewed as a 'litmus test' which highlights differences in policy characteristics across different types of welfare state regimes (Hobson 1994; Lewis 1997; Sainsbury 1999). While single mothers have a higher poverty rate than two parent families in all countries, its level varies significantly, from 5% in Sweden to 56% in the USA (Kilkey and Bradshaw 1999). Also, whereas in some countries single mothers tend to be supported through state assistance, they are more likely to work than married mothers in others (Duncan and Edwards 1997; Uzuhashi 1997). In short, single mothers' living conditions provide insight into the role of government policies in shaping women's lifestyle and well-being in and outside of marriage.

As Ann Orloff (1993) has argued, women's welfare is however not merely dependent on the availability of government programs, but also defined by their access to work and the ability to live independently from marriage and family support. Women in Japan have a high work participation rate, yet also tend to have limited access to permanent, career-track positions as employees, and have limited earning capacities, particularly as middle-aged mothers (Brinton 1993; Aiba and Wharton 2001; Brinton 2001). Government policies and company practices have reinforced a tendency for women to be placed in non-career track positions when single,

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retire from work on marriage and return as part-time workers in middle-age (Ogasawara 1998; Broadbent 2003). Within this setting, single mothers' working conditions reflect women's access to full-time employment, advancement, and a living wage, as well as women's ability to become financially independent from their husbands, families and the state.

In the following, I examine how Japanese single mothers manage to make ends meet between the market, family and state assistance. I first introduce recent trends in divorce and single motherhood, as well as major policy concerns surrounding single mothers' work, income, and reliance on state assistance. In the second section, based on a recent study conducted by the Japan Institute of Labor (JIL 2003), I outline single mothers' work patterns as well as the key issues they face in finding employment and earning a living wage. The final section explores how single mothers manage working motherhood based on individual case studies. Using concrete examples of single mothers' life courses and work histories, I assess the benefits of qualifications and experience, employment in specific occupations and sectors and the effects of marriage and motherhood on their long-term work trajectories and income.

2. SINGLE MOTHERS AND WELFARE POLICIES IN JAPAN

Single parent policies have been subject to reforms in a number of countries due to an increase in divorce and out of wedlock birth and single mothers' frequent reliance on public assistance (Lewis 1997). Similarly in Japan, a recent rise in the divorce rate and the growing number of single mothers relying on state assistance has been the major catalyst for reforms.

Japan had a remarkably low divorce rate until the early 1960s (0.73 per thousand in 1963), which steadily increased to 1.51 in 1983 and after a brief decline during the bubble economy reached a peak of 2.3 in 2003 (MHLW 2004). The continued increase in the divorce rate has led to a significant growth in the number of single mothers in Japan, from an estimated 626,200 in 1973 to 1.2 million in 2003 and to an increase of divorcees among single mothers (MHLW 2005). Whereas most single mothers in early postwar Japan were widows (many of whom lost their husbands during the war), since the 1970s, the majority of single mothers in Japan have been divorcees. Birth outside of wedlock, meanwhile, remains very uncommon with 1.93 % of births in 2003 (MHLW 2004). Today, the dominant majority of single mothers in Japan are divorcees (79.9 %), followed by widows (12 %) and never-married mothers (5.8 %) (MHLW 2005). Despite the increase in divorcees and single mothers in general, however, the

overall share of single mother households among families with dependent children, remains remarkably low at 5.8% in 1998, as compared to other industrialized countries (Uzuhashi 1997; MHLW 2003a).

Beyond demographic trends, the rise in Japan's divorce rate has been paralleled by a growing demand for state assistance, as many single mothers have difficulties to make a living. Since its establishment in 1962, the dependent children's allowance has been the major source of support for divorced and never-married single mothers in Japan. The allowance supports mothers who do not qualify for 'pensions for bereaved families' (*izoku nenkin*). Intended to 'contribute to the well-being of mothers and children,' the allowance provides a monthly cash grant up to ¥41,880 to mothers with no or a low income (below ¥3.65 million in 2005). With the increase in divorce in the past decades, the number of recipients of the dependent children's allowance has steadily increased from 166,487 in 1971 to 871,161 in 2003, causing concern about escalating government expenditure on single mothers' welfare (MHLW 2003b). Particularly since the recession in the late 1990s, the number of recipients has increased annually by 40,000–60,000 cases, leading to a number of cuts aimed at reducing demand for support (Ezawa and Fujiwara 2005).

It is important to note however that the dependent children's allowance is not an equivalent to public assistance or 'welfare' (i. e. *Sozialhilfe* in Germany or "Aid to Families with Dependent Children/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families" in the USA). Only few single mothers in Japan (14.5%) rely on public assistance (*seikatsu hogo*), while approximately 80% receive the dependent children's allowance (*Seikatsu hogo no dōkō henshū iinkai* [Editing Committee of Trends in Public Assistance] 2005: 30). Unlike public assistance, the dependent children's allowance is not means tested (i. e. allows assets and savings), and has a relatively high annual income limit (¥3.65 million). Whereas public assistance ensures a basic standard of living, the amount of the dependent children's allowance is not intended to cover all living expenses and in most cases adds to, rather than replaces, single mothers' income from work. Public transfers including the dependent children's allowance thus only constitute a minor share of their overall income (11.4%, MHLW 2003a). Instead of relying of full state assistance, an astonishing 83% of single mothers are working, and receive the dependent children's allowance mostly in addition to, rather than as a replacement for income from work (MHLW 2005).

One of the curious aspects of Japanese reforms, therefore, is that they promote work among single mothers who are for the most part already working. The single mothers' work rate in Japan has been above 80% for the entire postwar period. Moreover, the single mothers' work rate resembles more that of men, in that it remains above 80% for almost all ages,

exceeding even that of single women. Married mothers, by contrast, have a very low work participation rate, particularly during childbearing age (see Fig. 1). A recent study by the Japan Institute of Labor (2003) furthermore shows how single mothers outperform married mothers on many fronts. Whereas only 25.1% of married mothers with children below age one work, 58.2% of single mothers did so in 2001. Once children reach age two to three, single mothers' work rate jumps to 83.5%, but that of married mothers to only 37.1% (JIL 2003: 137). Single mothers are also more likely to work as permanent employees (*seishain*) than married mothers. In 2001, 48% of single mothers and 22% of married mothers were in permanent positions. Moreover, whereas married mothers earn between ¥500,000 and ¥1 million, single mothers tend to earn between ¥1.5 million and ¥2.5 million (JIL 2003: 242, 246). In short, single mothers in Japan have a remarkably high work rate – even when viewed in international comparison – and are more likely to work as permanent employees and earn significantly more than their married counterparts.

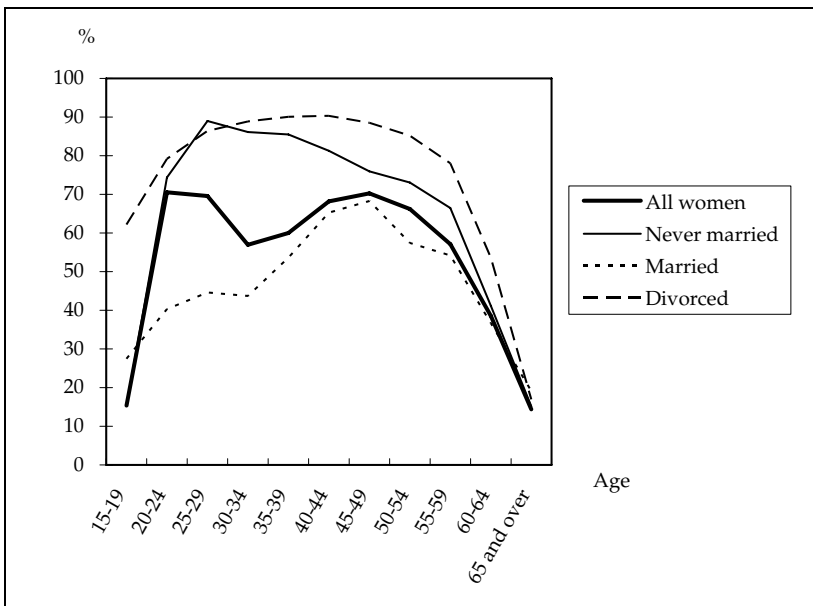


Fig. 1: Women's work participation rate by age and marital status.

Source: Created from the Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, *Kokusei chōsa* [Population Census], 2000.

For policy makers in Japan, the key issue is then not strictly to make more single mothers enter employment, but rather to help them earn a wage

that makes them independent from state assistance. Even though almost all single mothers are working, and most do so full-time, their average income, at ¥2.3 million in 2002 (MHLW 2005), remains well below the income limit of the dependent children's allowance. When compared with the living standards of other families, moreover, single mothers' income amounts to only a third of that of other families with children (¥7.0 million), a gap that has been increasing in the past decades (Yuzawa 1993). According to a recent study conducted by the National Institute for Population and Social Security Research, 65–70 % of single mothers who do not reside with their parents live in poverty, whereas only 10 % of two-parent families do so (Abe 2005). As a result, the major challenge for single mothers is not to get a job, but rather to earn an adequate income.

3. WOMEN, WORK, AND FAMILY

The situation of single mothers in Japan adds an important new twist to the question of how single mothers manage to balance work and child-care. Instead of a low work participation rate, it is an astonishingly high work rate, which requires explanation. If so few married mothers work, how do single mothers manage to balance children's needs with full-time employment? Furthermore, given that single mothers are already making extensive efforts to earn a living, what are the remaining obstacles mothers face in balancing work and family, and earning a higher income?

A key difference between single and married mothers is that whereas social policies have provided particularly middle-class mothers with incentives to stay home, single mothers have very few alternatives to work. Japanese scholars have long criticized the reinforcement of a gender division of labour through social policy, which encourages married women to devote themselves to household and children. Tax incentives, health insurance, pension coverage and family allowances, in particular, have made it financially more advantageous for married women to work part-time and earn less than ¥1.0 million as a way to avoid higher payments for insurance and pension and receiving lower family allowances (Osawa 1993; Shioda 1996; Osawa 1999). Thus, despite Japanese women's high educational attainment, the introduction of an Equal Employment Opportunities Law and maternity leave policies, the M-shaped employment curve of Japanese women has remained remarkably persistent (Brinton 1993; 2001).

To be sure, there is also a recent trend for married women to reenter the workforce or even to continue working while taking care of small children. As Nakai and Akachi (2000) have shown, there is a growing tenden-

cy for mothers to reenter the workforce after children have reached a certain age (33.2% in 1995). In addition, a small but significant minority of mothers (21.1% in 1995) continue to work without interruption, while an additional 10.1% are self-employed or work in a family business. The tendency to reenter the workforce is more pronounced for women with junior high school degrees (38.5%) than women with senior high school or a junior college education (34.3% and 25.0% respectively), suggesting financial needs behind mothers' employment (Kamata 1987). University graduates, meanwhile, are less likely to return if they leave the workforce (20.4%), but also have a stronger tendency to continue working without interruption (25.9%) even if they have children (Nakai and Akachi 2000). That is, university graduates are less likely to face financial pressures to reenter employment after becoming full-time housewives (cf. Osawa 2002), but also seem to have greater prospects for career and promotion if they stay employed. Furthermore, as Hirao (1999) has shown, university graduates who continue working after becoming mothers tend to work in the teaching professions or as public servants, both occupations with high job security, little over-time work, and strong maternity leave policies. Moreover, rather than the presence of day care centers, co-residence with parents seems to be more influential in allowing mothers to continue to work (Senda 2002). Thus, although there is a trend for women to stay in or reenter the workforce, it is so far only a minority of women, often with special circumstances working in niche sectors, who continue working full-time while taking care of preschool-aged children.

While married mothers have been encouraged to stay home while their children are small, single mothers rarely seem to have the opportunity to stay home with their children. Aside from income from work and state assistance, there is of course the option of relying on family support. Indeed, over a quarter (26.8%) of single mothers reside with their parents, possibly for financial reasons (JIL 2003: 162). Single mothers residing with parents, however, are more likely to work than those who do not, and are more often in full-time permanent positions (JIL 2003: 179). Child support payments from fathers, meanwhile, are poorly enforced as many divorces are settled out of court (cf. Shimoebisu 1989). In 2003, only 20.8% of single mothers reported receiving any child support payments (MHLW 2005). Private support through families and children's fathers thus plays only a minor role and does not replace single mothers' need to work.

Public assistance, meanwhile, carries a high stigma, to the extent that only those in dire need tend to apply and receive public assistance. As a recent study in the city of Yao (Osaka prefecture) has shown, only 5.8% of single mothers receiving public assistance in Yao had a junior college or university degree (for comparison, 14.7% of women attended junior col-

lege and 33.8% university on a national level; Sōrifu [Prime Minister's Office] 2003; Yao-shi [Yao-City] 2005). In addition, an astonishing 40.6% did not graduate from senior high school. Public assistance, in other words, serves primarily as a last resort for those with very few resources and qualifications. Indeed, even though more married mothers with junior or senior high school education work than college or university graduates, this trend is reversed among single mothers. University graduates' work rate increases from 52.1% to 91.8% after becoming a single mother, but only from 56.5% to 80.4% for junior high school graduates (Fujiwara 2005). That is, although more junior high school graduates work when married than university graduates, they also face more difficulties in finding employment on becoming a single mother, and are more likely to rely on public assistance.

Instead of relying on public assistance, the dominant majority of single mothers are receiving the dependent children's allowance in addition to their income from work. To help them make ends meet despite their low incomes, a range of programs have aimed to reduce their everyday living expenses. Single mothers with a low income are eligible to apply for public housing units, which provide long-term housing at very low cost. In 2003, 19.1% of single mothers were residing in a public housing unit (MHLW 2005: 2). There are also subsidized apartments for single mothers (*boshi apāto*); homes for single mothers (*boshi seikatsu shien shisetsu* [Livelihood support homes for mothers and children] previously called *boshiryō* [Homes for mothers and children]) not only provide low-cost housing but also consultation and support specifically catered to the needs of single mothers. In some localities, single mothers can also receive a waiver for the basic water fee, subsidized subway passes, as well as a waiver of contributions for medical services, which helps in reducing their everyday expenses.

Beyond financial assistance, single mothers' ability to work has been facilitated by a number of work-related services and programs. Like any jobseeker, single mothers have access to a nation-wide network of public employment security offices (*kōkyō shokugyō anteijō*, also called *harō wāku* [Hellowork]), which provide information on job openings and consultation. Single mothers are also eligible to take part in subsidized training programs at vocational schools, which allow them to upgrade their skills at no cost if they are receiving unemployment benefits or have divorced within the past three years. Recent policy reforms have also introduced special scholarships, which provide partial tuition assistance to single mothers for vocational training. For specific qualifications, which need extended training of two years or more, such as degrees in nursing or elderly care, there is also funding available to reimburse part of their maintenance

costs during the period of training. Finally, a program directed at employers subsidizes the wages of single mothers for several months if the employer agrees to hire her as a permanent employee after six months. Such programs have allowed many single mothers to obtain qualifications through short-term training, such as in accounting or basic level elderly care, and helped some of them find employment.

Most importantly, single mothers have been supported by subsidized public day care services, which make full-day care available at low or no cost. Even though most Japanese mothers are thought to be housewives, Japan actually has an extensive network of subsidized public day care centers which provide full-day care to children of working parents (cf. Uno 1999). In 2000, 5.6 % of infants below age one, 19.5 % of one and two-year-olds, and 35.7 % of four and five-year-olds in Japan were attending day care centers (this excludes children attending kindergartens which do not provide full-day care, MHLW 2003b). Although there are often waiting lists, single mothers usually receive preferential treatment in obtaining a place for their children in a public day care center, and if their income is low, fees are waived or reduced. While children of married mothers are more likely to stay home or attend kindergarten, 62.9 % of single mothers rely on full-time day care services (MHLW 2005).

The availability of public day care services has been a major source of support for working single mothers, yet the rules and limits of public day care services have also limited single mothers' employment opportunities. For single mothers as well as working parents, the primary challenge is how to balance work with day care services and children's needs. Since most public day care centers close at 6 or 7pm, and do not provide services on Sundays, single mothers' work opportunities tend to be limited to weekday 9am-5pm clerical jobs. Many jobs in service and retail, in which women might excel more easily (Creighton 1996), are difficult to manage because department stores and supermarkets today have evening hours and are open on weekends. In addition, the limited day care hours make it difficult to work overtime, often reducing mothers' work options to part-time positions with fixed hours. Since public day care centers do not take care of sick children, many mothers are also forced to stay home from work whenever their child falls ill, which may affect their job performance. Although some private day care centers provide 24-hour services, and babysitting services could be used in emergencies, few single mothers earn enough to be able to afford such services.

In recognition of these problems, the government has recently worked toward extending day care services through the 'Angel Plan.' In addition to expanding the availability of day care center places for children in lower age groups and promoting extended opening hours among existing

public day care centers, policies have also supported the establishment of 'family support centers', which provide child care after hours, and also offer overnight care for children in the case of a parent's hospitalization, funerals, and other emergencies. Some localities have also developed a community-based 'home help' service provided by individuals living in the area, who assist working parents with childcare after the end of day care center hours, and help with the care for sick children, as well as with housework. While these services are not free of cost and availability varies by locality, they are significantly more affordable than private day care services, and have helped at least some mothers to keep the balance between family and work more easily.

The consequences of the constraints imposed by children's needs particularly when of preschool age are reflected in single mothers' work patterns. Even though single mothers on average tend to work in permanent full-time positions more often than married mothers, few are able to obtain such positions while their children are below school age. Only 15.0% of single mothers with preschool-aged children have permanent positions, while 35.4% of mothers of elementary school students, and 38.8% of senior high school students do (JIL 2003: 321). Furthermore, mothers' work status has a direct bearing on their income; whereas single mothers who are permanent employees earn an average of ¥2.8 million, part-time workers earn only ¥1.2 million, even though most part-timers work more than 35 hours a week (JIL 2003: 184, 186). Hence, even though mothers with small children are able to find employment, many work part-time, with the consequence of having to manage on very low incomes while their children are small.

The difficulty of obtaining a permanent position when children are below school age also has long-term consequences for single mothers' work status and income. Although permanent positions generally provide more job security and a higher income, incomes vary significantly depending on length of job tenure as well as age at entry into a permanent position. Whereas mothers who entered permanent positions below age 27 earn incomes as high as ¥4.6 million after age 40, those who enter such positions after age 28 are unlikely to reach an income of ¥3.0 million (JIL 2003: 251). As the average age at first marriage is 26.8 (in 2000), and mothers' average age at first birth is 29.6, mothers who enter permanent employment after becoming a single mother are likely to already be in their thirties (MHLW 2004). Since most women quit their jobs after giving birth, and finding permanent employment while taking care of a toddler is difficult, a mother may not shift into permanent employment before her mid-thirties, which means that she might at best earn between ¥1.8 and ¥2.6 million even if she finds a permanent position (JIL 2003: 251).

Finally, there are also important differences in single mothers' income depending on their educational attainment. As Fujiwara (2005) has shown, single mothers who are university and junior college graduates are more likely to hold permanent positions (51.8% and 38.7%) as compared to junior and senior high school graduates (23.5% and 28.0% respectively). When viewed in terms of income, university educated single mothers in permanent positions earn on average ¥4.6 million, junior and senior high school graduates earn only ¥2.5 and ¥2.9 million respectively. In other words, even if a high school graduate obtains a permanent position and at a fairly young age, her educational background is likely to constrain the possibility of earning a higher income.

Single mothers are able to find work with the support of vocational training programs and subsidized day care services, but their work opportunities and incomes remain curtailed by their children's needs, as well as by educational attainment. Because of the high time commitment demanded of permanent workers, services provided by public day care centers are often not sufficient to allow them to hold down a full-time job while taking care of a preschooler. Even if a single mother enters a permanent position, her chances of earning an income above ¥3.0 million are low if she does not have a college degree or has interrupted employment due to child birth and entered into permanent positions only in her thirties. As most women today quit their jobs with marriage and childbirth, it is unlikely for most single mothers to exceed the income limit for the dependent children's allowance (currently ¥3.65 million) even in the long term.

4. MANAGING THE WORK – FAMILY BALANCE

In the light of the above observations, policies aiming to promote work and economic independence from state assistance among single mothers face a complex task. Whereas policy rhetoric seems to presume that entering employment equals economic independence, the realities of single mothers' wages indicate that employment per se is not necessarily a key to 'independence' because not all full-time positions provide a living wage. Furthermore, one might assume that salaries increase over time (as they do in the case of most men), yet women's employment is often unstable, and as a consequence, their incomes tend to stagnate over time. Policies aiming to promote single mothers' employment thus need to focus not only on women's educational attainment and qualifications, but also take into account the impact of marriage and childbirth on women's long-term work patterns and income.

To explore more fully the challenges of working single motherhood and the differences between single mothers, in this section, I introduce the stories and work trajectories of three single mothers in their forties. Focusing on three typical experiences, I wish to highlight important variations in women's work trajectories and their long-term consequences. My point is not to prove how many single mothers fall into each category; the sample is too small to make statistical inferences. Quantitative data, which illustrates the tendencies described in the three cases – the benefits of a bachelor's degree and early entry into career-track positions for obtaining a well-paid permanent position, as opposed to lower educational attainment and a fragmented work history, have already been discussed in the previous section. Rather, I seek to show what types of conditions and work patterns, which are not readily apparent from quantitative data, tend to allow single mothers to find permanent employment and become financially independent, and what type of conditions tend to limit their employment opportunities and income. That is, while the general trends in their employment and income are already apparent from aggregate data, I wish to provide insight into the everyday mechanics and logics behind single mothers' work patterns.

My analysis draws on fieldwork and sixty in-depth interviews I have conducted with single mothers in Tokyo since 1998. While my sample cannot accurately represent a larger population of single mothers in Japan, it captures the diversity of single mothers' experiences from widows, divorcees and never-married mothers, highly educated women from well-to-do families to mothers who grew up on public assistance. More specifically, 38 of my interviewees were divorced, five widowed, nine never-married, and eight separated for other reasons.² In terms of age, six mothers were in their twenties, the majority in their 30s (21), and 40s (26), and a small number were age fifty and above (7). Their educational attainment ranged from junior high school (5), senior high school (25) to junior college (8) and university and above (21). Of sixty interviewees, fifty-two were working, of these, 24 worked full-time, 20 were in part-time or other irregular employment, and eight were self-employed. Their occupations included regular office work, such as accounting, care work for the elderly, employment in a public school kitchen, professions including pharmacist and schoolteacher, self-employed artists and writers, as well as owners of small businesses such as a dry cleaning or flower store. Those not in the

² This includes women who are still in the course of completing divorce proceedings, women who separated after having lived in a common-law marriage without completing marriage formalities, as well as women who have experienced divorce but also gave birth out of wedlock.

workforce included temporarily unemployed mothers, mothers in education and training, and mothers staying home because of health issues.

The single mothers in this study engaged with the challenges of working motherhood with a variety of strategies and resources. To cope with day care hours, many chose a job with a short commuting distance, at times a job in the neighborhood to which they could commute within 10–15 minutes and by bicycle. Within this study, only mothers residing with their parents could afford a long commute of an hour or more while taking care of a preschooler. Because of the inability to work overtime almost all mothers in this study chose work with regular weekday 9am–5pm work hours and little or no overtime work or part-time jobs with fixed hours, unless they were self-employed. To minimize the repercussions of absences from work due to children's illness on their salaries, many saved their paid holidays. Use of public day care centers was almost universal; only a few high-income earners relied on private day care services with longer opening hours or made use of private babysitting services. Where possible, mothers mobilized other resources, asking parents, friends and neighbors to pick up their children from day care, or relied on community-based 'home help' services, yet their use was to the most part sporadic rather than regular. Reflecting the importance of full-day day care services and the availability of care for sick children, those living with their parents were the ones with the most stable employment, who experienced the fewest problems at work, even though they had small children.

Yet, even though the majority of mothers in this study were working full-time and made use of public day care centers, very few earned an income high enough to disqualify them from the dependent children's allowance.³ Notably, five of the six mothers with high incomes, who did not receive the dependent children's allowance, had bachelors degrees or higher, and the sixth had a junior college degree as well as qualifications in accounting and was residing with her parents. All of them had worked without interruption since graduation and had been in their current job or occupation since their twenties or early thirties. In terms of job sector, two had public sector jobs with high job security, one was self-employed running a business out of her home and was residing with family, and the remaining three held positions in private companies. The two mothers who worked in the private sector but did not reside with parents had a high income, but also faced considerable expenses for private day care services and worried significantly about their job performance; one of the

³ This excludes never-married mothers who were not eligible for the dependent children's allowance between 1985 and 1998 if the children's father acknowledged his paternity.

two eventually was demoted into a position that pushed her income below the dependent children's allowance's income limit. In other words, without job security or family support for childcare emergencies, balancing a career-track job and motherhood remains a difficult and risky affair.

A university degree and a full-time job in themselves were thus not sufficient to allow mothers to keep their jobs or maintain a high income. More often, women started out in non-career track jobs, temporarily quit their jobs after childbirth and took on different types of work at a later stage, leaving them with a fragmented work history and few qualifications and little sustained work experience. Those with junior or senior high school degrees often began working part-time as early as age sixteen, but few had qualifications, permanent jobs or sustained work experience in a specific occupation. Only a few high school graduates, who consciously pursued qualifications and jobs with opportunities for promotion from an early age, were able to find relatively well paid employment even in their thirties and forties. As this remained the exception rather than the rule, however, most had to manage to make a living on low incomes and the dependent children's allowance, unless they were able to enter a subsidized public housing unit.

To provide insight into the dynamics of single mothers' life courses and work histories, I discuss the stories of three single mothers whose experience matches the above patterns in greater detail below. For comparison, I have chosen to present the stories of mothers of similar age who became single mothers when their children were below school age. Now in their forties, their experiences not only provide us with insight into the challenges of working motherhood, but also single mothers' long term work trajectories.

4.1. *Rie Yoshioka*⁴

Rie is a school teacher and the mother of a five-year old. She started working in a public school in Tokyo after graduating from university and has remained employed as a teacher and public servant since then. With a salary of ¥7.0 million and a stable job, and living in a privately rented apartment, she might be considered as an ideal case, even though her life took some unexpected turns.

Rie grew up outside of Tokyo in the early 1960s. Although her mother was a housewife, she alerted her to the rights women had gained with the postwar Japanese constitution from an early age. While almost all of her

⁴ All names as well as minor details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

female schoolmates desired to become brides (*o-yome-san*) as adults, as a child she was fascinated with the idea of becoming a craftsman. When she entered university, her interests shifted to teaching and education and after graduation, she found a job as a teacher in a public school. In her mid-twenties, Rie married but continued working as before. Although she had no children during her marriage, she was determined to continue working even if she had children, an issue that became a major point of contention in her marriage. A few years after her marriage had dissolved, she unexpectedly found herself pregnant and gave birth at age 38.

Giving birth in her late thirties, and without a partner, was an event with many challenges and uncertainties. She knew nobody else who had given birth outside of wedlock and at an older age. But her workplace turned out to be very accommodating of her needs. When she announced the news to the school management, they matter-of-factly responded that they would arrange for a maternity leave replacement. Rie was able to take a year-long maternity leave, living off a small allowance and savings. When she returned to work, she was placed in a class with relatively few demands, where she could rely on other teachers whenever she had a child care emergency. She notes: "Without the child care and maternity leave, I would not have been able to come this far (...). Since I do not have relatives or family nearby, if there had not been such support at my workplace, I would not have been able to make it (...). I am grateful to those who helped me out then; in my case, everything went smoothly thanks to my colleagues."

Although she felt alone and hesitated to ask friends and family for help, Rie was able to manage with the support of an accommodating workplace and basic public services. In preparation for her return to work, she applied early and obtained a place for her daughter in a day care center near her house. That way, she could drop off her daughter right after the opening of the day care center at 7:30 am and still be on time for work at 8:10 am. Although her work often extends to the evening hours, with phone calls from parents and class preparations, she can usually leave her workplace on time and take work home if necessary; although time is tight, she can usually pick up her daughter just before the day care center closes at 7pm. To manage emergencies, she registered with the local 'family support service' which provides help with child care through the local government. While her everyday life is hectic, she feels reassured by the job security she enjoys as a public servant.

Rie's story, although unusual in some respects, seems like an ideal scenario. She pursued a career from an early age, obtained a permanent and life-time position in her mid-twenties, and was able to benefit from family-friendly workplace policies when she unexpectedly became a mother.

Besides job security, she also enjoys a comparatively high income. Her situation would be different, however, had she followed her ex-husband's request to quit working, or had she worked in the private sector, as the following cases will illustrate.

4.2. Atsuko Ueda

While Rie's story reflects the trajectory of a minority of university-educated women in career-track jobs, Atsuko's case is closer to that of the average Japanese woman. Atsuko attended junior college, worked as a clerical worker and at a few other jobs in her twenties and quit working after getting married. Her salary rose to ¥4.0 million in her twenties but declined to ¥2.5 million when she became a single mother in her thirties, reflecting the uncertainties and fluctuations typical of many single mothers' work histories.

Atsuko grew up outside of Tokyo in the late 1950s. Although she aspired to attend university like her brothers, it took some time to convince her father, who saw little use in investing in his daughter's education, of the value of sending her to college. Eventually, she studied business at a junior college, as a way of studying "something useful." After graduation, she found a job as an accounting clerk in a small company, but changed jobs frequently. She explains: "At the time, there was no such thing as a woman working while raising children (...). I did not think of getting a job in a company and working there all my life. (...) so I did not put too much effort into searching for a job (...). When everybody [other female clerical workers] began quitting [because of marriage] I also thought about quitting and eventually left."

Having grown bored of clerical jobs by her mid-twenties, she wanted to try a job with more responsibility and became a manager in a small café. She says: "Until then I was an accounting clerk; I wanted to do a real job, something that would allow me to become independent (...). It was rare at the time to get a managerial job as a woman." Obtaining this position increased her salary from about ¥2.0 to ¥4.0 million but also came with long workdays from 7am to 8pm. Barely able to see the daylight because of its basement location, she quit after two years, realizing that even as a café manager she was only a hired employee, with no real independent decision-making power. Approaching her thirties, she felt disillusioned by the world of work, and anticipating marriage, decided to work as a temporary contract employee (*haken*) for about ¥2.8 million.

After she married at age 29, she continued working for a short while, but eventually quit after giving birth, because of pressure from her hus-

band. She stayed home with her daughter until her separation a few years later. In her early thirties, with a small child and no recent work history, she had difficulty finding work and settled for a part-time job. To upgrade her skills, she attended a six month course in a vocational school, which helped her find a clerical job in a small company with an annual income of approximately ¥2.5 million. As she found it difficult to take time off from work when her daughter fell ill, she used a home-help service provided by the local city government to cover for emergencies. In addition, she chose a job with a low work load and little responsibility, and 9am–5:30pm work hours, which allowed her to pick up her daughter from the day care center by 6pm.

Although her salary was low, she was able to make ends meet with subsidized rent in a public housing apartment and with the dependent children's allowance. When her daughter entered middle-school, she realized her dream of opening a small store with the help of government loans and some personal assets. Even though she does not earn much from her sales, she pays very little for housing, and together with the dependent children's allowance, hopes to be able to make a living despite limited profits.

Atsuko's story reflects the changes and uncertainties facing women who anticipate marriage and motherhood rather than a career. Although Atsuko has considerable work experience, she changed jobs several times, and initially did not pursue professional qualifications or a career track job. Because she had not worked for several years, she found it difficult to reenter employment in her thirties. When she found a full-time job, however, her salary varied little from what she had earned in her early twenties. Having a small child in her care made it more difficult to invest more time and energy in work and advancement in her thirties, leaving her with little opportunity to pursue promotion and advancement. Opening a store with the help of public loans and personal assets in this sense, was a unique opportunity to finally become her 'own boss' even though it came with little income.

4.3. Minako Kato

Minako's experience combines some of the elements of Rie and Atsuko's stories, while at the same time underlining the challenges of managing with very few resources and a high school rather than college degree. Born in the early 1960s, Minako attended a professional school to become a hairdresser after graduation from high school, and worked in a beauty salon for several years. Even though she had anticipated working as an adult, marriage and separation led to several changes in jobs and profes-

sion, which made it difficult to regain full-time employment in her late thirties. Today, she works as a contractual employee, earns ¥2.8 million of annual salary, and receives support in form of subsidized housing in a public housing unit, and the dependent children's allowance.

Fond of children, Minako aspired to becoming a kindergarten teacher as a teenager. However, her mother advised her that it might be difficult to find a job, so she settled for a qualification in hairdressing, gradually working herself up to a salary of ¥2.8 million in her twenties. Married at age 27, she quit hairdressing, and at her husband's family's request, worked part-time in their family business. Eager to add to the family income, she continued working throughout pregnancy and childbirth. Due to financial troubles and her husband's gambling addiction, she divorced in her early thirties when her daughter was barely a year old. Having little savings, and nowhere else to go, she temporarily sought rescue in a mother-and-children's home which provides low-cost housing for single mothers.

Finding a job after separation was complicated by the fact that she was unable to get back into hairdressing, had no other qualifications and a small child to take care of. She remembers: "When I was looking for work then, I earned only ¥700 [an hour], because I had no qualifications. But in the case of accounting offices, I saw advertisements for hourly wages as high as ¥1,500." Attracted by the higher hourly wages, she then applied for a six-month course in accounting in order to improve her qualifications. In searching for a new job as an accounting clerk, she was conscious of the time and costs of a long commute, and decided to narrow her search to jobs within 30 minutes of commuting distance to be able to accommodate her daughter's needs. She found it difficult to find a full-time job, and eventually settled for a part-time job as an accounting clerk for ¥900 an hour and an annual income of about ¥1.2 million.

Although this pushed her income below taxable wage, she was able to enter a public housing unit, where the rent was heavily subsidized, so she was able to make ends meet with the dependent children's allowance and low wages. Once her daughter entered elementary school, she searched for a full-time job and eventually found contractual employment as an accounting clerk with an annual salary of ¥2.8 million. She notes: "If you are over forty, it is hard to get an office job. Until 35, there are jobs but now that I am 43, I think it is difficult. I am grateful and try not to complain; it would be great to find work elsewhere, but there may be none."

Minako might be described as someone who has made significant efforts to find work, by acquiring qualifications for jobs that promise a stable income, from hair dressing to accounting. Despite her efforts to acquire qualifications as well as work experience, she however had difficul-

ties in finding a full-time job due to her age. While her income is comparatively high for a high school graduate, it has, as in the case of Atsuko, changed little since her twenties, and is unlikely to increase much in the future. In the absence of job stability and opportunities for promotion, public housing and the dependent children's allowance have played a crucial role in helping her make ends meet despite her low income.

5. DISCUSSION

The stories of Rie, Atsuko and Minako provide insight into the experiences of single mothers with different social backgrounds. Although they are similar in age, and faced similar problems, their life and work trajectories took quite different turns. In this last section, I reexamine the possibilities and constraints of working single motherhood in light of their experiences.

From a policy perspective, Rie's experience might be viewed as a model case; she is in stable employment and earns an income high enough to disqualify her from state assistance in the form of the dependent children's allowance. Yet, it is also evident that her experience is in many ways unique. As a woman with a university degree and qualifications as a teacher, she started her working career with greater possibilities for a long-term career than women with junior college or high school degrees. Her job as a teacher in a public school also came with long-term job security and a family-friendly work environment. Being a schoolteacher has historically been one of the few occupations offering long-term work opportunities for women; schools today also routinely employ maternity leave replacements, as many teachers are female, and continue working even if they have family. Moreover, despite the responsibility she bears as a teacher and her high income, Rie is able to return home by 7pm due to the flexible nature of her work.

Her experience would have been quite different had she worked in the private sector. Akemi Nakamura, a 34-year-old mother of a preschooler, for instance, worked as a graphic designer in her twenties, having graduated from an art university with qualifications in design. Yet, unable to keep up with the long work hours demanded by her job, she switched to part-time work and later a regular 9am-5pm clerical job after becoming a single mother, to be able to accommodate her daughter's needs. As mentioned earlier, to maintain a career-track job, mothers need to mobilize help from family or private babysitting services to be able to work until 8pm or 9pm if necessary, which can however create considerable financial burdens. Without job security or family support, single mothers are more

likely to choose occupations, which accommodate day care hours and allow more family time even if working conditions are unstable and the salary low.

Apart from qualifications and workplace policies, the fact that Rie held on to her job despite pressure from her husband to quit working may have been a major reason for being able to enjoy stability in work and wages when becoming a single mother in her late thirties. As noted earlier, only university graduates who enter permanent positions in their twenties are likely to earn an income above ¥3.0 million (JIL 2003). Had Rie quit working, she probably would have shared the uncertainties of employment and income experienced by Atsuko.

Atsuko's experience, in turn, highlights how aspirations toward marriage and motherhood, as well as gender role expectations cannot be separated from an analysis of women's work trajectories. Whether and how women work, is often affected by their family environment, spouses, life events such as marriage and childbirth; it is not simply determined by individual effort (Thompson 1997). Even though Atsuko is almost the same age as Rie, she was discouraged from pursuing higher education as a teenager, and received little support in pursuing a career-track job as an adult. Whereas Rie was eager to acquire qualifications and work, Atsuko believed that most women were not working as mothers, and that women are unlikely to become managers. Consequently, she invested little thought or effort into work in her twenties, working as a clerical worker for many years, assuming she would have to quit with marriage. Her disinterest in a career-track job may have also been fostered by the segregated work environment of the early 1980s where women were generally only hired for non-career track clerical positions as Office Ladies (cf. Brinton 1993; Ogasawara 1998). Although she began to search for work with more responsibility and independence in her mid-twenties, her pursuits were disrupted by her aspirations to marriage and her husband's resistance to working motherhood. Atsuko, in this sense, did not only have difficulty finding full-time work because of the lack of a recent work history and the presence of a small child; her difficulty in finding work and her decline in income had as much to do with gender role expectations from her family, husband and employers, which obstructed a more focused pursuit of a profession and led her to interrupt her working career.

Minako's experience in turn, reflects the trajectory of a woman of working class background, who had anticipated working as an adult and throughout marriage, and consciously acquired qualifications in pursuit of occupations in demand. Nevertheless, her work history was also punctuated by life events, as she changed her profession and worked in the business of her husband's family at their request. Despite qualifications and many

years of work experience, she has had difficulty finding stable employment as a single mother. Although she did comparatively well given her educational background, her case illustrates the limits of advancement through training. Since she obtained training and became a clerical accountant only in her mid-thirties, her qualifications had relatively little impact on her employment prospects and income without longer work experience in accounting. The only senior high school graduate in this study who was able to find full-time employment as a clerical accountant in her forties had acquired her qualifications in her twenties and had consistently worked within this field since then. Minako, as the only high school graduate in her workplace was able to make the best of her situation, but her employment is unlikely to become more stable in the near future.

Our analysis has a number of implications for policies which aim to promote employment and a higher income among single mothers. To begin with, while Japanese policies have been able to promote a very high work participation rate among single mothers, increasing their salaries to a level that makes them independent from state assistance comes with a different set of challenges. To earn an income above the income limit for the dependent children's allowance would require conditions similar to those described by Rie's case. As indicated in the statistical data mentioned earlier, however, unless a mother is a university graduate and has pursued a long-term working career since her twenties, she is unlikely to earn an income above ¥3.65 million in middle age. In addition, as Atsuko's case illustrates, women often initially work in non-career-track positions and companies tend not to invest in their training and advancement, resulting in lower rewards despite long-term job tenure (cf. Brinton 1989). Even if a mother pursues a working career in her twenties, as Akemi Nakamura, she may not be able to remain in her job after becoming a (single) mother, because day care hours and child care emergencies make it difficult to respond to the demands of a private sector, career-track job. To support single mothers' employment and advancement would thus require a weakening of sex segregation in the labor market, greater support for female employees' training and advancement, as well as family-friendly policies that allow employees to balance work and family life.

As only few mothers with small children in Japan continue working, the major challenge for policy makers is to support those who have changed or interrupted their employment because of marriage and motherhood. While both Atsuko and Minako navigated working motherhood skillfully, after becoming single mothers neither of them were able to earn an income above ¥3.0 million or even increase their incomes to a level above what they had earned in their twenties. Although qualifications and training helped them find employment, entering full-time or career-track jobs

in their thirties was complicated by the presence of small children. Even if they had entered permanent positions, it would have been, as we saw earlier, unlikely for their incomes to increase substantially because they entered permanent employment at such a late stage. Minako's difficulties in finding a full-time job with a better salary, in this sense, are no coincidence and reflect the impact of life events and motherhood as well as education and age on her work opportunities and income. The dependent children's allowance, in addition to single mothers' low incomes, has thus played a central role in allowing mothers to manage to make ends meet on their low incomes. Established in recognition of women's disadvantages in the labor market (Yamatoka 1977), the dependent children's allowance will remain an important source of support until women have more equitable access to permanent positions which provide a living wage.

If job segregation, educational attainment and gendered life courses are a major influence on single mothers' long-term work opportunities and income, their low incomes are unlikely to be increased by just a little more effort. Going back to our initial discussion, the major problem women like Atsuko face is that they count on marriage as an economic base, and may give in to the pressure to become full-time housewives. While policies protecting married women allow women to devote themselves to housework and child care more fully, they also create major obstacles for women to regain financial independence in the case of separation. Policy makers wishing to make single mothers independent from state assistance will not only need to improve the working conditions of single mothers, but also promote an environment where mothers in general can continue working and become more independent from family and state assistance.

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