

## *Chapter 4*

# INTERGENERATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS OF NON-MARITAL PREGNANCIES IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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**T**he initial reaction of Junko, a forty-two-year-old college graduate in a full-time job, to her pregnancy was unambiguous:

At first I was happy I was pregnant. Very, very [happy]. It maybe sounds strange, but it was because I had never been pregnant before, I was so happy to be expecting a baby ... Only the father of the child already had a family, so marriage was [not possible]. I myself have had a divorce, so I felt married life is somewhat difficult [for me], but I had a strong desire to have a child. I was already thirty-three when I got pregnant. Gradually [I felt] I was getting old, so at first I honestly thought even if I cannot get married I will have this child.

As Junko had a full-time job, which she knew she would be able to keep after bearing a child, little seemed to stand in the way of her passionate desire to become a mother. Yet when she started thinking about her parents, her determination crumbled:

I could not convey my feelings to my parents. I got really distressed about it and just could not figure a way to tell them. Although inside myself I was sure what I wanted to do, I felt that without my parents' support I could not raise the child. Quitting my job was not an option. I would continue working, yet I could not imagine renting a

flat somewhere and raising a child alone. [To be able to have a child] I first of all needed my parents' support. Yet I could not bring myself to tell them about this pregnancy and this really worried me. [I felt] like I could not raise a child. I got really insecure and considered an abortion.

Junko's story illustrates several important aspects of the reality of being a lone, unmarried mother in contemporary Japan. Limited welfare provision means that the majority of Japanese single mothers have to work to support themselves and their children. Like Junko, many women need their parents' support to be able to combine work and childcare (J.I.L. 2003: 404; Wright 2007). Ensuring such support, however, is rarely easy, and as in Junko's case, it is rarely expected. Japanese people are still less likely to approve of a woman who 'wants to have a child as a single parent but ... does not want to have a stable relationship with a man' than westerners (the phrase used in the 2005 World Values Survey). Moreover, people aged over fifty (the grandparents' generation) are considerably less forgiving than their younger counterparts (Hertog 2011), and like Junko, women who become pregnant outside of marriage feel unable to even tell their parents, fearing such moral opprobrium. Yet when it comes to other sexuality and family-related norms, Japan is far from a conservative reproductive culture. Sex out of marriage is a common practice, marriages take place late in life (the average age of marriage is now close to thirty for both men and women), the divorce rate has been rising over the past few decades, and in that respect Japan is now comparable with many European countries. This background of relatively liberal sexual and family norms makes the low illegitimacy rates in Japan a particularly interesting puzzle to consider.

This chapter will investigate how parents' reactions to non-marital pregnancies affect the ways in which women resolve these pregnancies in Japan. I use the term non-marital in this chapter to refer to events, like pregnancy and childbirth, which happen to women who are not currently married and who do not have a prospect of marriage in the immediate future. For students of social change, studying the ways in which families negotiate non-marital pregnancies offers important insights into moral judgements in relation to reproductive behaviours. Although historically Japan had relatively high rates of non-marital births, these fell throughout the twentieth century and have stayed at or below two per cent since the 1950s (Drixler 2013; Hertog 2009). The factors behind this fall are complex and deserve a separate investigation. It is likely, however,

that the state's promotion of child-bearing within marital unions (Fuess 2004), and post-war economic change, which solidified gender-role segregation within the Japanese labour market and in households (Brinton 1993) played a part in encouraging women to avoid non-marital child-bearing. Furthermore, the easy availability of abortions, against a cultural background in which abortions are morally non-controversial, has given them the means to do so (Lefleur 1992; Norgren 2001). In many countries religion plays a key role in shaping the abortion debate. Yet in Japanese Buddhism, small children have historically been believed to pass easily between the realm of buddhas and *kami*, the human world, and back again, in the case of an early death. Given this perspective it seems less surprising that these days in Japan '(t)he focus is neither on the rights of the mother nor on the personhood of the fetus, but rather on the social life of the child, the welfare of the family, and the question of the social good more broadly' (Borovoy 2011: 1). The role of religion in this context is often a practical one: Buddhist *mizuko* rites offer a way of 'handling' the guilt and grief associated with having experienced an abortion.

Throughout the post-war years abortion has been the socially acceptable solution for non-marital pregnancies, so much so that in public sentiment it was virtually normalized as another means of contraception. As Japan was late in legalizing modern contraceptive practices based on hormonal treatments, and still has relatively low rates of adoption for these practices (Norgren 2001), the social acceptance and easy availability of abortion have been key factors enabling the country to maintain its low rates of non-marital child-bearing.

The rarity of childbirth outside marriage suggests that unmarried motherhood is a particularly costly step for any woman to take. As abortion is an easily available and socially acceptable alternative solution for non-marital pregnancies, women who have children in Japan without being married tend to base their decisions on careful deliberations. As we will see, the grandparents-to-be are often intimately involved in the process. The negotiations offer an illuminating window onto the nuances of grandparents' and their non-maritally-pregnant daughters' views concerning the acceptability of illegitimacy.

As already noted, we know from surveys (e.g., the World Values Survey) that the grandparents' generation in Japan strongly disapproves of women raising children on their own. These surveys, however, do not document any potential variation in parents' attitudes

depending on whether it is their own daughter who is raising a child outside of marriage, or somebody else. Yet as we know for example from the U.K., a parallel system of values, where grandparents condemn certain family choices, and yet end up supporting their own adult children in making these choices, is not uncommon (Smart 2005). Normative change can move not only 'forwards' across generations, i.e., from parents to children, but also 'backwards', with younger generations' norms and values influencing older people's. Japan is an excellent test case to observe this process because of the large intergenerational differences in values when it comes to illegitimacy.

## **Data and Methods**

Qualitative methods were chosen for this project as these have been known to be invaluable in mapping out uncharted areas, particularly so when the subjects of the research are a tiny minority, difficult to capture with methods that aim at 'representativeness'. Non-marital pregnancies are a sensitive topic; non-marital births occur rarely and are highly stigmatized in Japan. In addition, it is virtually impossible for a researcher to distinguish mothers who had their children outside marriage from other single mothers, unless these women choose to identify themselves. These factors mean that face-to-face in-depth interviews are the most illuminating method for understanding the negotiation of non-marital pregnancy. In my wider research (Hertog 2009) I employed participant observation, online ethnography of unmarried mothers' chat rooms, and discourse analysis of public and popular culture to capture the everyday reality of single unmarried mothers in Japan. Discourse analysis of public and popular culture offered insights into images of unmarried mothers in the public consciousness, online ethnography of unmarried mothers' chat rooms and ethnographic observations of unmarried mother families (including volunteering in welfare institutions supporting such families) have helped me to detail the day-to-day concerns of unmarried Japanese mothers with children. While offering insights into welfare access, legal discrimination and child-rearing norms, however, these methods yielded limited information about the negotiations with significant others and the decision-making process these women went through when they found themselves unmarried and pregnant.

This chapter primarily draws upon sixty-eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with unmarried mothers and twelve semi-structured interviews with divorcees conducted in Japan between June 2004 and May 2005. To ensure diversity and avoid the risk of a uniformly-biased sample I used several ways of identifying and contacting potential interviewees. I relied on introductions from three lobby groups: Single Mothers' Forum (hereafter Forum), *Kongaiishi Sabetsu wo Tatakau Kai* (Association Fighting Discrimination against Illegitimate Children, hereafter *Konsakai*) and *Nakusō Koseki to Kongaiishi Sabetsu Kōryūkai* (Let's Eliminate Family Registry and Illegitimacy-Associated Discrimination Association, hereafter *Kōryūkai*). Active members of these three organizations introduced me to eleven unmarried mothers. Four more were enlisted through snowballing from these initial contacts. I also asked Forum, *Kōryūkai* and an internet chat room for single mothers (*Singuru Mazā Kaigishitsu*) to put information about my research on their websites. Through these advertisements, I recruited forty-one unmarried mothers to interview.

Twelve more never-married mothers were found in six Mother and Child Living Support Facilities (*Boshi Seikatsu Shien Shisetsu*). These facilities are welfare institutions providing free housing and general care to single mothers and their children. Only a small minority of single-mother families (around 4,000 of around 1.5 million in 2006) live in these facilities. Typically single mothers who are admitted have problems beyond simply being the sole breadwinners and child carers of their families, such as extreme poverty, homelessness, being victims of abuse and so on (M.H.L.W. 2006; Zenbokyō 2006).

When identifying respondents, I specifically aimed for diversity within the sample in terms of the following categories: age, income, education, employment type, and residence at the time the decision about childbirth was made. I interviewed women in urban and rural areas. The age of unmarried mothers varied from nineteen to seventy-three, but the majority of women (four-fifths of them) were in their thirties or forties, an age distribution similar to that of the sample of unmarried mothers in the Japan Institute of Labour survey (J.I.L. 2003). In terms of educational background, they ranged from junior high school graduates to women with doctorate degrees. Around two-fifths of the unmarried mothers I interviewed were employed full-time, about a third had various part-time working arrangements, a fifth were unemployed and four women were self-employed. This compared to a national distribution of 23.6,

41.5, 22.5 and 10.1 per cent respectively (J.I.L. 2003: 308, 326). The average income was 2.7 million yen a year, slightly higher than the 2.33 million yen a year estimated by the Japanese Institute of Labour in 2003 (J.I.L. 2003: 358).

I recruited a comparative sample of divorcees through the same avenues that I used to find the unmarried mothers. The age of the divorcees interviewed ranged from twenty-one to fifty-two and they were between fifteen and thirty-three when they had their first children. Their level of education ranged from junior high school to university. Some of them had only part-time jobs and some were employed full-time. Their average income was 2.5 million yen.

### **Family Reactions**

For most of the unmarried mothers I interviewed their pregnancies were unexpected: results of a contraceptive failure, carelessness or a mistaken belief in one's own infertility. Only fifteen of the sixty-eight women planned their pregnancies.

None of these women shared these plans with their parents as they expected disapproval and were unwilling to face confrontation before they were sure they were actually pregnant. Thus the families of all the unmarried mothers I interviewed got involved in the decision-making only once their daughters were already pregnant. Parents played a very important role in the process. This is rather different from what we know, for example, about the United States, where Finer et al. note that fewer than one per cent of abortion patients say 'their parents' or partners' desire for them to have an abortion was the most important reason' (2005: 110; see also Edin and Kefalas 2005). Once it became clear to my unmarried and pregnant interviewees that the father of their child was not going to marry them, it was parental reactions with which the majority of them were most concerned. Even before the parents expressed their views, most women worried that their fathers would be completely against it, and kept wondering how they could make their parents understand.

Half of the women found it difficult to muster the courage to tell their parents about the pregnancy and delayed telling them for as long as possible. Concern about parents' reactions was shared by almost all women interviewed, so telling the parents involved a lot of strategizing, including deliberating over the means of communicating the pregnancy. Women whose pregnancy was undetected

by parents because they lived separately, had an easy pregnancy or did not gain much weight, often chose to avoid face-to-face disclosure. Rather they sent a letter or asked a relative to tell their parents. When Kumiko, a fifty-year-old self-employed university graduate, got pregnant at thirty-six she could not bring herself to tell her parents she was planning to have a child outside marriage. She waited until her younger brother went to visit her parents and gave him a letter to pass to them. Makiko, a thirty-four-year-old high school graduate, told her mother herself, but only in the sixth month of pregnancy, when abortion is no longer legally possible. She feared that if her mother 'understood earlier there would be a lot of trouble'.

Thirty-one out of sixty-eight unmarried mothers interviewed only dared to notify their parents when abortion was legally impossible because as Yoshiko, a thirty-year-old university graduate, explained: 'If I told them earlier they would have definitely made me have an abortion, I was expecting this reaction'. Having finally steeled themselves to tell their parents, few women expected a positive or even neutral reaction; many were preparing for the worst, some of them relinquishing any hope for parental support. Michiko, a twenty-eight-year-old high school graduate, remembered that her father was furious:

*Michiko:* 'Either you should have an abortion or get out of this house; choose!'

*Hertog:* Did you expect this?

*Michiko:* I expected that, so I thought I would have to leave. It is when my mother told me I could give birth that I was quite surprised. I thought she'd say 'have an abortion', she'd say 'go away' too.

While Michiko was pleasantly surprised by her mother's understanding, many more women saw their worst expectations come true. Parents of Akemi, thirty-six-year-old full-time employed high school graduate, were worried about what the neighbours would think, 'so they said they would like me to have an abortion. And if I did not, they would rather I left home. So I packed and left. Since then we have not really been in touch'. Akemi was neither surprised by this reaction nor found it particularly harsh. She commented: 'If an [unmarried] daughter gets pregnant just like that, no parent will say "how wonderful!"'

Unmarried mothers-to-be often based the decision to have a child outside wedlock on the presumption that they would have to

manage without help. Madoka, a twenty-seven-year-old dispatch worker with a high school education, ensured she would be able to support herself and her child, and then presented her parents with a *fait accompli*:

Realizing I was pregnant, I spent about a month sorting out things at work. I explained [my situation] at work [and was assured I could come back to work after a few months of childcare leave], I sorted out everything else and then went to my parents and informed them 'I did this and this and that, so now I am sure I will give birth'.

Generally speaking, parents who lived in big cities were more lenient, and those from rural areas were stricter and more prone to attach great importance to neighbours' opinions. Interestingly, there was no clear pattern of differences based on the parents' class, educational or professional background. The intergenerational interactions in this study, however, were profoundly gendered, with fathers tending to be less forgiving than mothers. My interviewees' mothers were rarely positive about the prospect of an illegitimate grandchild, but many of them reconciled themselves with their daughters' choices much more easily than their husbands. As often as not, mothers sided with their daughters and helped to talk the fathers round. According to my interviewees this greater tolerance from the mothers was to an extent due to their greater understanding of their daughters' feelings. According to a study done by the Japanese Institute of Labour, fifty-seven per cent of unmarried Japanese mothers had their children between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four (J.I.L. 2003: 302). This is the age when some women, especially those not in a romantic relationship, start feeling caught between the imperative to look for a husband and fear that while searching for a marriage partner they may lose their chance to have a child. Women's mothers often felt this even more acutely, as in their generation women married and had children much earlier than is common in contemporary Japan. The older the daughter, the more likely her mother was to accept her choice to give birth outside marriage. Tomoko's story illustrates how a desire for one's daughter to experience motherhood could trump a mother's opposition to illegitimacy. As Tomoko was approaching forty and was still unmarried and childless, her mother grew ever more alarmed. 'She kept saying "it would be better if you at least have a child ... even if you immediately divorce it is better if you marry and have a child" ... [Of course] she never encouraged me to have a child outside marriage'. Still when Tomoko, a self-employed university graduate, got

pregnant by accident at thirty-eight and thought she would like to keep the child even though there was no prospect of marriage, she met with little resistance. Her mother said 'Well, why not?'

Mothers' personal experiences with marriage also appeared to have a considerable effect on their reactions. When Kyoko's divorced mother did not particularly oppose her decision to have a child outside marriage, Kyoko was not surprised. 'She was a person who thought that a childless life is just not right. She felt even if this child is born outside marriage it is still better [to have it]. I think this was because her own marriage was a mistake.'

Fathers' reactions to the prospect of having an illegitimate grandchild were much more negative. Anticipating their reactions, many of the unmarried mothers-to-be first broke the news to their mothers and enlisted their support to mention the pregnancy to the father at the most opportune moment. As Yumiko's and Haruko's stories demonstrate below, these precautions were rarely sufficient to assuage the fathers' wrath. When she realized she was pregnant and had decided to keep the child, Yumiko, a forty-six-year-old civil servant with a university education, wrote a letter to her mother explaining the situation and asking her to tell her father about it in the best possible way. According to Yumiko her 'mother understood and agreed to think of how to explain it'. In spite of all their diplomatic efforts, Yumiko's father got extremely angry when he heard that she was about to give birth outside marriage. Refusing to listen to any explanations, he wrote to her saying that 'he does not want to see the grandchild, he does not recognize [this child] as his granddaughter. It was a terrible letter. I have never seen my father like that'.

Haruko, a thirty-nine-year-old university graduate in fixed-term employment, had a similar experience. She told her mother about her pregnancy and her decision to have a child outside marriage early on. Her mother, a practising Christian, was shocked and told her 'To be honest I do not know how to forgive you, although I must. The child, however, is innocent, I will help you for the sake of the child'. Haruko only dared to tell her father just before her son was born. After hearing the news he got extremely drunk and had to be hospitalized with alcohol poisoning. Hearing about this Haruko wrote him a long letter apologizing for her decision:

Soon the reply came back. It was a letter of notification of severing all ties with me. 'I do not think you are my daughter, do not think you are my child.' It was a letter severing ties. From then on he really refused to have anything to do with me for three years. Just before my

son became three we, for the first time, went to meet his grandfather. That was the first time he agreed to meet us.

Once a non-marital pregnancy was announced to the parents, they first of all investigated alternatives to out-of-wedlock child-bearing: a 'shotgun' marriage (*dekichatta kekkon*) and an abortion. For most parents (except two Christian families who opposed abortion) either of these was vastly preferable, and most unmarried mothers reported receiving a lot of pressure to opt for one or the other.

*'Shotgun' Marriages: Striving for Ordinarity*

In some cases parents did not just pressure their daughters towards marriage, but took the matter fully into their own hands. Two out of twelve divorced mothers I interviewed had their children within marital unions only because of the efforts their parents made to secure these marriages. Moreover in both cases it was reasonably clear that the marriages were unlikely to last, but still the women's parents found them preferable to having a grandchild born out of wedlock. Ai, one of the two divorcees, was twenty-seven at the time of her pregnancy, had a university education and an upper-middle-class upbringing. After a recent miscarriage she could not bring herself to have an abortion so she tried to secure a marriage. Her boyfriend, however, showed no desire to marry her. He told Ai that he wanted her to have an abortion and married somebody else shortly afterwards. Not knowing what to do, Ai turned to her parents for help. The rest of the story is quite dramatic:

[As a student my mother heard a talk about legal discrimination against illegitimate children which mentioned that to safeguard against such discrimination one should at least have a paper marriage before childbirth.] My mother, remembering that talk, thought probably in our case [a paper marriage] is also the only way. She sought a lawyer's advice, but he said we could sue for a certain amount of compensation only if the wife [of Ai's former boyfriend] got married knowing about me. But the more we heard about the case the more obvious it became that she did not know and in that case the law is not broken [said the lawyer]. 'It is impossible to press them to divorce from this side. On the contrary, they can sue us and as it will be disadvantageous, nothing can be done.' My mother got terribly angry and said the following to [the child's father]: 'If you at least talked to your parents or somebody else you could first have a paper marriage with my daughter and then the child would not be discriminated against as illegitimate. But because you got married, what will you do for us? Now there is nothing you can do apart from paying compensation!'

After this admonishment the father of Ai's child negotiated a divorce with his wife, married his pregnant ex-girlfriend, waited until the child was born, and then divorced Ai and remarried his first wife.

The second woman was Satomi, a twenty-one-year-old junior high school graduate who grew up in a working-class family and had her child at the age of sixteen. Satomi discovered her pregnancy only in the seventh month, when it was too late to have an abortion. The father of her child was not much older than Satomi and showed no interest in or ability to support a family. Still, Satomi explained:

... my parents and his parents met and registered the marriage papers. As we were both underage it was all arranged by parents. It was a shotgun marriage so no one was sure we would manage together but we decided to give it a try ... We never lived together, however; although we registered the marriage I stayed with my parents and he lived in his own apartment ... And then my husband did not work, got violent and continued having affairs ... in a year it looked completely hopeless and we separated.

Ai and Satomi came from very different backgrounds. Satomi's father was a plumber with only a junior high school education, her mother graduated from high school and stayed at home as a housewife and the family was always somewhat short of money. Ai's parents, on the other hand, were both university graduates; her mother went to Tokyo University, a rare accomplishment for a woman of her generation. With the father employed by a T.V. broadcaster and the mother working as a school teacher, the family was quite wealthy. In spite of the very different family backgrounds in the face of a non-marital pregnancy, both women were subjected to similar pressures and in both cases the families did their best to ensure marriages for their daughters. I will discuss the reasons for parents' strong wish to ensure their daughters only give birth within marriages below, but before I turn to that matter a few words need to be said about the other alternative to out-of-wedlock child-bearing, namely, abortion.

#### *When Marriage is Impossible: Pressure towards Abortion*

Few of my interviewees felt themselves capable or would have been allowed by their families to reject marriage when faced with a pregnancy. However, for more than half of the unmarried mothers I interviewed, marriage was out of the question since the father of their child was already married to somebody else. Only three unmarried mothers from my sample tried to push the men to divorce their wives. Most of those among my interviewees who had children

with single men did not pursue marriage because these men refused to cooperate.

When marriage was out of the question, parents almost invariably saw abortion as the best solution for a non-marital pregnancy and pressured their daughters towards it. This point is vividly illustrated by the story of Noriko, a thirty-nine-year-old full-time employed unmarried mother with a university degree. She had been dating a man for several years. When she turned twenty-six they were engaged to be married, and she discovered that she was pregnant. Happily, Noriko started preparing for a wedding. It turned out, however, that her boyfriend was seeing somebody else at the same time and he could not bring himself to marry Noriko. After lengthy and painful deliberations Noriko decided to have the child anyway. While there was a hope that Noriko would marry her son's father, her whole family was very supportive. However, when it became obvious that marriage was out of the question her parents altered their stance:

'we cannot force him into marriage if he is planning to marry another woman' ... and from the moment they understood my ex-fiancé was such an [unreliable] man they started pressuring me. 'Do not have this child!' They kept saying that until my pregnancy exceeded six months. Convincing them took more than two months ... only when I was more than six months pregnant did they give up.

### **Why Were Parents So Opposed to their Daughters Having Children Outside Wedlock?**

A fundamental reason behind parents' opposition to their daughters having illegitimate children was the conviction that such children are destined to be underachievers and suffer from strong social prejudice throughout their lives. Given that the moral issues associated with abortion are focused on the welfare of the future mother and child and the effect on society in general, many of the parents believed abortion would be better for the child than being born outside marriage. Yuri remembered:

Of course [they say], 'What do you think about the child? Do you realize what a miserable situation your daughter will find herself in? Which discrimination she will face? You will not be able to explain to her about the father. Do you realize what a horrible thing you do raising a child without a father?' That is what they are angry about.

Many of the parents' concerns overlapped with those of their daughters (see Hertog 2009). Parents believed that a child needs a two-parent family to grow up in and a mother alone cannot properly replace a father as a breadwinner or provide the crucial male role model for her children. Also, both parents and daughters felt that, forced to substitute for a father, a woman will not be able to be a good mother. Unsurprisingly, given the older generation's greater conservatism, their belief in the importance of two-parent families for children was stronger than that of their daughters. The worry about the unborn child's prospects was mixed with a concern about the daughter, who, many parents feared, 'will just make it very hard for herself' by becoming a mother without being married. In addition to a general worry about the wellbeing of their daughter and her potential child, parents were much more sensitive to the stigma and shame associated with illegitimacy than their daughters.

This is illustrated by Asuka's story, which took place when Asuka's mother first came to visit her in the maternity ward where Asuka, a thirty-six-year-old university graduate, was recovering after childbirth. A nosy nurse loudly expressed concern for Asuka's 'poor child' and professed deep sympathy with the mother of a daughter who went on and gave birth to an illegitimate child. While Asuka herself was merely angry with the nurse and complained to the hospital authorities about this unwelcome intrusion, her mother was so embarrassed she never dared to visit Asuka in the hospital again.

The strong parental fear of stigma was reflected in their commitment to information management when they could not ensure their daughter's marriage or convince her to opt for an abortion. Some parents banned their daughter from visiting them with the newly-born grandchild. Others did not go so far, but invested a lot of effort into preventing the spread of information about their daughter's family situation. The parents of Kumiko, a fifty-year-old self-employed university graduate, were furious when they found out about her pregnancy:

They immediately said, 'Have an abortion! We will never forgive you!' But their attitude changed quickly too. They run their own business and they told everyone that I got married. Some relatives visited them at the time it seems and they told them I got pregnant and had a shotgun wedding.

One of the reasons why it was easy for Kumiko's parents to hide the truth is that they lived in Kyushu whereas she lived and worked in Tokyo. Haruko, whose son was six years old at the time of the

interview, told me that she did not mind telling relatives about her son, and so the close relatives from her mother's side knew. However, her father was finding it very difficult to deal with the situation:

He was a headmaster in an elementary school. He put both me and Daisuke [younger brother] through university. He was particularly proud that these were rather good universities. He had a family he was satisfied with. And then I had a child outside wedlock. This is a real minus, a real disadvantage for him. So he cannot talk about it. If he is asked whether I am doing well, he cannot answer anything but 'Aaah! She is working in Cambodia, she is a hard-working career woman!' The relatives on his side still do not know [about my son].

Unmarried mothers are held more responsible for their situation than divorcees. In cases involving divorced women, blame is often shared between husband and wife and this allows both the divorcee and her parents to reduce or even avoid stigmatization completely. Haruko described this perceived difference very poignantly:

My cousin on my mother's side is now thirty ... She got married and had a child, but when the child was about two years old she got divorced. The reason was that her husband started seeing another woman and so they separated. At that time I was told the following thing and it really freaked me out. I am a single mother, she is a single mother too, but the way we are seen, the way other relatives see us [is different]: Haruko became like that [a single mother], because she wished to, she decided that herself, but Yuko, it is as if she got into a traffic accident. In short, Yuko is not at all to blame. This way of thinking takes it for granted that only her husband is bad, because he started seeing another woman.

Given that disapproval of out-of-wedlock child-bearing is strongly correlated with age, it is hardly surprising that the parents of my interviewees feared condemnation by friends, relatives and neighbours of the same age. The parents were much less likely to meet understanding among their peers than their daughters were. The well-documented normative belief that holds parents responsible for their children's outcomes (Borovoy 2005; Fujita 1989; Ivry 2006; Jolivet 1997; White 1993) made them particularly sensitive.

In addition to normative pressures, the Japanese 'family register' (*koseki*) system encourages viewing child-bearing as something to be managed not only at an individual, but also at a family level, potentially promoting intergenerational power struggles over reproduction. The register system treats two generations (parents

and children) as a single unit, thus making the identities of parents and children interdependent (for a detailed discussion see Hertog 2009, Chapter 4). It is possible to see from a family register whether a daughter of a given family gave birth before entering a marital union, unless she takes steps to leave her parents' register prior to giving birth, and very few women are aware of this loophole.

The potential of family registers to stigmatize whole families for their daughters' choices has been reduced substantially in the past decades through reducing somewhat the level of detail of the information recorded and enforcing the confidentiality of the registers. As a result, the younger women in the sample were less concerned with keeping their family registers 'clean'. Most of my interviewees were in their thirties or early forties and few of them described the state of the family register as their main concern when they found themselves pregnant with no prospect of marriage. The women that felt the difference in the ways legitimate and illegitimate children were registered was unfair and believed it would be better if the situation was changed. Yet they were also likely to describe the difference as an administrative issue with little consequence for their everyday lives, as family registers are rarely used.

Nevertheless, the parents (who were mostly in their fifties and sixties at the time their daughters became pregnant) remembered the time when it was relatively easy for third parties such as prospective employers or potential parents-in-law to gain access to one's family register before making their final decision about employment or marriage. A history of illegitimacy in the family in those circumstances could have a dramatic negative effect on the prospects of all family members. This history of discrimination meant that all family members were interested in ensuring socially acceptable reproduction of their close relatives. Modern grandparents(-to-be) often continue to be influenced by the past discrimination and feel it is their responsibility to their daughters as well as the wider family circle to be involved in their daughters' family choices. Most parents actively struggled to manage their daughters' reproduction, opposing out-of-wedlock child-bearing by their daughters, believing it would only lead to suffering, both for the mother and the child.

In sum, most of my never-married interviewees experienced strong pressure to marry or have an abortion. This section has addressed why parents were so exceptionally sensitive when it came to the marital status of their daughters at childbirth. The question of why adult daughters were so worried about their parents' opinions

– with some considering an abortion in anticipation of parental reactions – remains open and is addressed in the next section.

### **Why Do Adult Daughters Attach So Much Importance to their Parents' Views?**

This chapter is largely based on a sample of women who had children outside wedlock, in most cases against the wishes of their parents. This sample throws little light on how successful parents typically are in preventing their daughters from having children outside marriage. My interviewees, however, clearly demonstrated that daughters attach a lot of importance to their parents' views. The extent of their concern seemed somewhat disproportionate, especially for women in their mid-thirties who were in full-time jobs. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that my sample consists of daughters who were less sensitive to their parents' opinions, as, after all, they ultimately defied them.

Some of this concern with parents' reactions arose from the fact that on average it takes a Japanese woman a long time to achieve residential and financial independence. In their late twenties, only about fifty per cent of women consider themselves 'financially independent' or 'rather more independent than dependent on their parents', and in their thirties, forty-six per cent of unmarried women continue receiving financial help from their parents (Miyamoto et al. 1997: 64–68, 119). In 2005 an average of seventy-six per cent of unmarried women aged eighteen to thirty-four and seventy per cent aged thirty-five to thirty-nine coresided with their parents (N.I.P.S.S.R. 2005). Family formation usually leads to residential independence. However, single mothers' disadvantageous socio-economic environment means it is particularly difficult for them to achieve such independence. According to the *Longitudinal Survey of Children Born in the 21st Century*, twenty per cent of two-parent families with five-year-old children coreside with parents, while the corresponding figure for single never-married mothers is 55.3 per cent (Iwasawa and Mita 2008: 178).

Many single mothers not only find it difficult to afford a separate residence, but given their low incomes landlords often ask them to find someone who will guarantee their rents. In this situation being able to use one's parents as guarantors is a significant help. Even more women depend on parents for help with balancing work and childcare. Forty-nine per cent of mothers in full-time employment

with children aged less than eighteen months rely on the support of grandmothers in child-rearing (and for full-time employed mothers with children aged six months, the figure jumps to 57.1 per cent (M.H.L.W. 2003)). Forty per cent of single unmarried mothers in my sample received extensive support from their parents and most of these women believed that raising a child alone would have been impossible for them without their parents' help. For mothers of very young children parental support was often crucial for securing a job. Iwasawa and Mita's study (2008) has shown that coresiding with parents significantly increased a single mother's chances of having a part-time job in the first few years of her child's life.

Sachiko, a thirty-two-year-old full-time employed college graduate managed, to her surprise, to get a part-time job a few months after her baby was born and never had to face a long spell of unemployment after that:

I think these days when one is looking for employment the [employers'] condition [for hiring] is that there should be someone looking after the child if anything happens. I feel I was employed in the first place because there was someone [my mother] to look after the child. Even if I cannot go [home], there is someone instead of me there. I was always asked [about it]. Everywhere I went for job interviews I was always asked and because I could clear this point I was successful in getting jobs.

Child-rearing support was important for my interviewees for one more reason: in Japan children are believed to need a father figure to grow up normally (Hertog 2009). In single-mother families often women's own fathers were tasked with fulfilling this role. As Noriko, a thirty-nine-year-old university graduate explained: 'The grandfather plays a role of a father figure. I have a son, so he needs a father ... I get the grandfather to spend time and help me raise my son'. This common delegation of a paternal role to grandfathers made maintaining good relationships with them particularly important.

Securing their parents' support could be particularly difficult for unmarried mothers. According to Iwasawa and Mita (2008: 178), while seventy per cent of all single mothers coresided with their parents at the time their children were born, in the case of single never-married mothers the figure dropped to sixty-two per cent. The lower coresidency rate may reflect parental displeasure or fear of stigma, and may perhaps be the consequence of attempts to pressure their daughters towards abortions by threatening to give no support. In my sample of unmarried mothers, some women had to

wait for months or even years to be forgiven by their parents, and in the cases of a few women, relationships never normalized.

Finally, as already mentioned, parents were much more sensitive to stigma and shaming associated with grandchildren born outside of marriage. Several of my interviewees specifically mentioned that fear that they will make their parents suffer has contributed to their uneasiness about having a child outside of wedlock. Kaori, a thirty-one-year-old high school graduate, said for example that when she decided to carry her non-marital pregnancy to term she had first planned not to tell her parents anything because 'I was told by my parents long ago I should have a proper marriage. I felt sad to destroy [their dream]'. In sum, difficulties in securing parental support together with the strong need for it and a realization that their decision may cause intense shame to their families go a long way to explain why unmarried pregnant women were so worried about their parents' reactions to their choices.

## **Conclusion**

In most industrialized countries over the past several decades the increase in child-bearing and child-rearing outside marriage has come to be seen as an unavoidable consequence of industrialization, modernization and concurrent change in social mores. Although Japan underwent most of the social and economic changes to which the growth of illegitimacy in the West is often attributed, the number of unmarried mothers there has remained minuscule. Most contemporary Japanese family trends follow those of Western industrialized countries: marriages happen later, cohabitation rates are growing, the birth rate is falling and the crude divorce rate is now close to the European average. Against this background the continuous strong association of marriage with child-bearing in Japan is striking.

This chapter analysed the intergenerational power struggles involved in the resolution of non-marital pregnancies, focusing in particular on the moral judgements that parents made when their unmarried daughters got pregnant. Japanese society stands out by the extent of the grandparents' involvement in and influence over their unmarried daughters' child-bearing decisions. Their involvement is encouraged by normative cultures and several state-level institutional structures that strongly benefit 'normal' two-parent families. In particular family registries have been shown to encourage family-level management of reproductive choices, while meagre

welfare support promotes adult daughters' economic dependence on their parents' support, especially when they need to combine work with child-rearing.

Grandparents' initial response to their own daughters' pregnancies tended to be negative and thus in line with the generally documented attitudes. Yet the grandparents in this study were revealed not to be moral automatons; their judgements varied in accordance with their own life histories and were open to change over time, i.e., we observe intergenerational change in child-bearing norms moving 'backward' as well as 'forward'. The responses of grandparents were highly gendered – talking about pregnancy outside marriage with grandfathers-to-be was often felt to be much more difficult, and many of the women approached their own mothers first and asked them to talk their fathers round. This gender difference was linked to men's and women's different experiences of family life in Japan. Grandmothers who themselves had had unhappy marriages were particularly liberal. A grandmother-to-be could also come to accept the idea of an illegitimate grandchild if she felt that this was the only way for her daughter to race against the biological clock and have any children at all. Grandfathers were slower to relent. Still, some of the grandfathers who had cut off their daughters completely upon learning that they had become pregnant outside marriage, ended up meeting, accepting and becoming involved with their grandchildren to the extent of providing them an alternative 'father figure'. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for the grandparents to attempt to resolve the conflict between their public abhorrence of illegitimacy and private acceptance of their daughters' choices through information management strategies, such as pretending their daughters had had hasty marriages and divorces, or that they were working elsewhere. This perceived necessity for deception speaks eloquently of their continued belief that one individual's reproductive choices can have an impact on the moral status of the entire family.

Grandparents' initially negative responses, in line with the generally hostile attitudes to child-bearing outside marriage among older Japanese people, may be an important factor contributing to the very low rates of child-bearing outside wedlock in contemporary Japan. Many women who find themselves unmarried and pregnant may feel like Junko, introduced at the beginning of this chapter. They feel they need their parents' support to be able to have children outside marriage and they may not have the courage to wait until their parents relent.

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