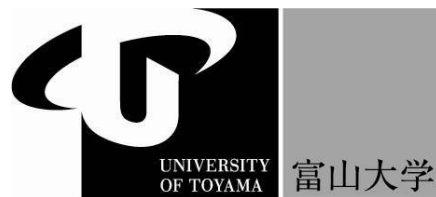


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**Sleep and health deprivation of single
mothers in Japan**

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Sleep and health deprivation of single mothers in Japan¹

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This paper focuses on sleep and health deprivation of single mothers in Japan. Our statistical analysis demonstrates that some of the health consequences of single mothers' constrained choice. Compared to married mothers, single mothers are not able to reduce their working hours even when they are ill, or when they need to meet family obligations. Conversely, longer work hours correlate negatively with single mothers' health, while no such effect is found for married mothers. Being a single mother in Japan means not having the luxury of making a choice to optimize her own well-being when circumstances call for adaptation.

1. Introduction[\[1\]](#)

This study sets out to elucidate particular aspects of the social constraints that single mothers are subject to in Japan. We will argue that these social constraints are in effect a form of structural violence, in that they institutionalize practices of discrimination that make it harder for them to achieve their basic needs (Galtung 1969). The fulcrum of power here is a social welfare system imbued with traditional gender and family values, in which single mothers are deemed as non-conformists. As a result, they are often denied benefits of various kinds. One way in which this predicament manifests itself is in their poor health, which is the focus of this study. Its empirical subject is Japanese single mothers, but it has broader implications for understanding the relationship between family and gender ideology, policy decisions, and individual outcomes.

This study first reviews the literature on financial and social difficulties faced by single mothers in Japan, arguing that these can be traced to gender values that are mediated and enacted by government policy and labor market dynamics. For example, by turning a blind eye to fathers who neglect family support payment obligations after divorce, and by not redressing a labor market segmentation based on gender rather than

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merit, the state virtually guarantees that single mothers will be much poorer than married ones on average. And in fact, the majority of single-mother households live in poverty even though these mothers often work long hours and multiple jobs.

Our statistical analysis then demonstrates some of the health consequences of single mothers' constrained choice. For example, compared to married mothers, single mothers are not able to reduce their working hours even when they are ill, or when they need to attend to ongoing family obligations. Married mothers, on the other hand, can and do adjust work hours in response to their childcare responsibilities and health status. Conversely, longer work hours correlate negatively with single mothers' health, while no analogous effect is found for married mothers. Being a single mother in Japan means not having the luxury of making a choice to optimize her own well-being when circumstances call for adjustment and adaptation.

2. The Dual Exclusion of Single Mothers from the Labor Market and the Welfare State

Single mothers often experience financial and social difficulties. This section reviews the literature on structural roots of such difficulties. Broadly speaking, their hardship is traceable to their dual exclusion from resources to meet their basic needs: the labor market and the welfare system. In both domains, the Japanese ideology of gender and the family plays a role in the process of assigning rights and obligations.

The dominant ideology of gender and the family puts emphasis on motherhood. It prioritizes the mother-child relationship over the couple relationship. Women are also expected to be primary caretakers of children (Sechiyama 1996). The Japanese legal system fully reflects this ideology and provides benefits to female full-time homemakers or semi-full-time homemakers whose life course and lifestyle are compatible with it. For example, wives whose income is below a certain amount receive a tax break and are exempt from pension contribution obligations. The cutoff point is equivalent to approximately USD10,000. Wives who earn less than this are rewarded, while those making more are penalized by the tax code. The tax and pension exemptions incentivize women to make a limited commitment, if any, to a paid job, and to prioritize economic dependency rather than independence (Nakamura and Akiyoshi 2015).

According to Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare capitalism, Japan may be classified as a hybrid of liberal regime and conservative regime. It is liberal in that it emphasizes market solutions to social problems, addresses only minimum needs of low-income earners, and provides them with modest assistance (Esping-Andersen 1990). It is contrasted with a more universalistic regime in which the state provides welfare

services for all, rather than just for the poor, often in exchange for hefty social taxation. The Japanese regime is also conservative in that it emphasizes traditional family values that condone the male breadwinner model. Nominally, the Japanese state promotes gender equality both in workplace and at home. And yet as the example of the tax code illustrates, its commitment is not enshrined in law.

There are 1.06 million single mothers (Nishi 2012; Nishi 2017). Most (77%) enter this status as a result of divorce. 17% have never married. The death of a spouse accounts for 6.3%. In the case of single motherhood due to divorce, more than 80% of child custody goes to women (National Institute of Population and National Security Research 2018). This high proportion suggests the predominance of an ideology of mother as primary caretaker. The Japanese legal system does not allow joint custody. As a result, most Japanese divorced mothers are left to fend for themselves. Mothers who become single by widowhood are often entitled to bereaved wife pension benefits. Single mothers due to divorce have no equivalent benefits and they are often poorer than widowed mothers.

Furthermore, there is no legal mechanism to enforce child support payment. 76% of Japanese divorced fathers do not pay child support even when they have agreed to do so in connection with the divorce proceeding (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare 2016). This leaves many Japanese single mothers and dependent children financially insecure. While fathers are rarely held accountable for not financially supporting children after divorce, single mothers have to annually disclose their financial situation to local government in order to be eligible for subsidies. The survey is intrusive: in some cases, it asks whether the single mother is seeing someone romantically; how often they visit their partner's place; if she is currently pregnant, etc. The rationale is that if a single mother has a boyfriend, she could be receiving financial support from him and may not deserve government subsidies. Single mothers who are not eligible for other reasons, such as having sufficient income of their own, are still required to complete the survey. The sociologist Yuki Senda argues persuasively that a major purpose of this annual disclosure requirement is to punish single mothers, humiliating them and violating their privacy (Senda 2019).

The economic insecurity of single mothers is also perpetuated by gender inequality in the Japanese labor market. The lifetime employment system and the expectation of arbitrarily long work hours deter many Japanese women from pursuing a career and achieving gainful employment (Yamaguchi 2017). 46.9% leave the labor force entirely after their first birth, expecting that after returning to work they will not be able to put in the expected long hours (Cabinet office 2018a). If they wish to return to the labor

market after their children are older, obtaining full-time employment in midlife is difficult because the lifetime employment system strongly favors those already in the pipeline. In such a system, any break in career, even in the case taking a legally permitted parental leave, is a self-inflicted wound from which few can recover. Many companies still hire full-time employees immediately upon graduation and do not accommodate those with child-rearing or elderly care responsibilities. Thus, women who seek a return to employment in midlife often must accept poorly paying part-time jobs.

The distinction of full-time and part-time is crucial in understanding the labor market outcome in Japan because of its severe labor market segmentation (Doeringer and Piore 1971). Part-time work often represents the secondary sector in Japan. It is characterized by high turnover, low wages, and little prospect for skills development or promotion. In many cases it also lacks benefits such as paid sick leave, health insurance, and social security contributions by the employer. Assignment to this segment is often determined by gender rather than the applicant's skills or preference, resulting in overemployment of (often unqualified) men and underemployment of (often highly qualified) women (Yamaguchi 2017). 70% of all part-time workers are women. 56% of female workers and 22% of male workers are part-time workers (Cabinet Office 2018b). Of those who work part-time because a full-time position is not available, most are female. In short, a labor market that tracks people into career trajectories based on gender effectively traps single mothers in the secondary sector as part-time workers.

In addition to precarious support from former spouses and being relegated to the secondary labor market with limited security, elusive welfare benefits often confine single mothers and their children in poverty. The percentage of Japanese single mothers who depend on welfare payments was about 10% in 2009, much lower than their counterparts in the U.S. (Akaishi 2009). There is very strong stigma against receiving governmental support, and even among single mothers who apply for it, the denial rate is high (Akaishi 2009). Akaishi (2009) estimates that 70 to 80% of Japanese single mothers earn wages lower than the amount of the welfare allowance and are thus living under the official poverty level. And yet, single mothers applying for welfare are encouraged to seek work instead even when they have young children. As a result, Japan's poverty rate for single parents with children is among the highest of OECD countries: more than 50% in the case of single mothers (Abe 2008). The median income of single mother households is 2.5 million yen while the median income of two parents household is 6.7 million yen and that of single father household is 4 million yen (JILPT 2019).

Thus, Japanese single mothers experience dual exclusion from the labor market and the welfare system, with both of these reinforcing and reinforced by gender and family values. They are more likely to be in the least advantaged sector of the labor force, more likely to be granted sole child custody, less likely to receive welfare benefits, and less likely to get child support from fathers compared to single mothers in other developed societies. When they can obtain neither a good-paying job nor a welfare benefit, working long hours for low wages may be the only survival strategy. And in fact, Japanese single mothers do work much longer hours than their counterparts in the U.S (Tamiya and Shikata 2007). As we will see below, in some cases this comes at the expense of their health.

The double burden of raising children on their own and working long hours forces women to sleep less (Abe 2008). The potential impact on their health is clear, but existing studies have not thoroughly investigated this yet. In response, the current study looks at the health consequences for Japanese single mothers as a result of ~~due to~~ their double burden, using JGSS2012.

3. Hypothesis, Data, and Variables

The literature review establishes that Japanese single mothers tend to work more hours than they would deem optimal for themselves. That is, they tend to work longer hours than they wish even when they experience poor health. It also suggests that the highly segmented labor market and the welfare regime deny them access to resources to meet basic needs. This section tests two hypotheses that further examine the link between single mothers' health and work hours through comparisons with married mothers.

3.1 Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1:

The working hours of married mothers respond to two factors: their health and the number of children they have. Single mothers do not reduce their work hours in response to either of these factors.

Hypothesis 2: As childrearing responsibilities and work hours increase, single mothers' health deteriorates, while that of their married counterparts does not.

3.2 Data

In order to investigate the health deprivation of single mothers, this study uses JGSS2012 data. JGSS2012 (Japanese General Social Surveys 2012) is a nationwide survey conducted in Japan using a random sample. The data includes variables such as work hours, marital status, health condition, income sources.

It is cross-sectional data, employing two-stage stratified random sampling, and includes men and women, aged 20 to 89, living in Japan. In order to focus on women of childbearing age, our study only includes women from ages 20 to 49 in the analysis. Attack sample size is 9000, and valid sample is 4667.

3.3. Variables

In this study, dependent variables were weekly work hours of main job (for section 4.1.), and self-rated health (for section 4.2., reverse recoded so that higher values signify better health). Independent variables used in this analysis are: sex, age, squared age, education (“high school and less,” “junior college or technical colleges,” “university and higher”), respondent’s yearly income (midpoint), number of children, sources of income (including income of oneself, husbands, parents, other family members, pension, unemployment insurance, social welfare, rental income, and other).

Table1: Distribution of the variables

		Married			Single		
		Frequency	Percent	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Percent
Marital Status	Married	687	100.0	100.0	74	19.9	19.9
	Divorced				5	1.3	1.3
	Widowed				293	78.8	78.8
	Never married				372	100.0	100.0
Number of Children	0	81	11.8	11.9	298	80.1	80.1
	1	151	22.0	22.1	28	7.5	7.5
	2	335	48.8	49.0	26	7.0	7.0
	3	98	14.3	14.3	19	5.1	5.1
	4	15	2.2	2.2			
	5	3	.4	.4	1	.3	.3
	Total	683	99.4	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
	Missing	4	.6				
	Total	687	100.0				
Source of Income: Self	0	264	38.4	38.4	79	21.2	21.2
	1	423	61.6	61.6	293	78.8	78.8
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Husband	0	23	3.3	3.3	372	100.0	100.0
	1	664	96.7	96.7			
	Total	687	100.0	100.0			
Source of Income: Parent(s)	0	657	95.6	95.6	178	47.8	47.8
	1	30	4.4	4.4	194	52.2	52.2
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Other family members	0	674	98.1	98.1	344	92.5	92.5
	1	13	1.9	1.9	28	7.5	7.5
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Pension	0	666	96.9	96.9	337	90.6	90.6
	1	21	3.1	3.1	35	9.4	9.4
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Unemployment Insurance	0	685	99.7	99.7	368	98.9	98.9
	1	2	.3	.3	4	1.1	1.1
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Savings	0	666	96.9	96.9	352	94.6	94.6
	1	21	3.1	3.1	20	5.4	5.4
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Social welfare	0	680	99.0	99.0	350	94.1	94.1
	1	7	1.0	1.0	22	5.9	5.9
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Rental income	0	681	99.1	99.1	368	98.9	98.9
	1	6	.9	.9	4	1.1	1.1
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Source of Income: Other	0	685	99.7	99.7	369	99.2	99.2
	1	2	.3	.3	3	.8	.8
	Total	687	100.0	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
Education	Junior Highschool	23	3.3	3.4	4	1.1	1.1
	Senior Highschool	310	45.1	45.4	164	44.1	44.1
	Technical College	43	6.3	6.3	13	3.5	3.5
	Junior College	162	23.6	23.7	77	20.7	20.7
	University	136	19.8	19.9	109	29.3	29.3
	Graduate School	9	1.3	1.3	5	1.3	1.3
	Total	683	99.4	100.0	372	100.0	100.0
	No Answer	4	.6				
Total	687	100.0					
Health	1. Very good	143	20.8	41.7	55	14.8	29.4
	2	97	14.1	28.3	52	14.0	27.8
	3	72	10.5	21.0	52	14.0	27.8
	4	30	4.4	8.7	23	6.2	12.3
	5. Very poor	1	.1	.3	5	1.3	2.7
	Total	343	49.9	100.0	187	50.3	100.0
	N/A	344	50.1		184	49.5	
	No answer				1	.3	
Total	687	100.0		372	100.0		
		Age	Hours worked by week	Self annual Income	Age	Hours worked by week	Self annual Income
	N Valid	687	429	583	372	294	309
	Missing	0	258	104	0	78	63
	Mean	39.11	30.08	121.9383	31.61	39.06	201.6181
	Std. Deviation	6.438	12.977	160.80078	8.330	12.141	153.16086
	Minimum	20	2	0.00	20	4	0.00
	Maximum	49	80	1300.00	49	70	925.00

4. Analysis (JGSS)

4.1 Determinants of work hours

Table2: Determinants of Work Hours

	Married		Single	
	B	S. E.	B	S. E.
Constant	66.809 **	22.992	-15.904	13.161
Age	-1.095	1.204	2.449 **	0.777
Squared age	0.013	0.015	-0.035 **	0.012
Number of children	-1.222 †	0.713	-0.671	0.949
Junior college	-0.326	1.481	1.192	1.729
University/ Graduage School	0.207	1.696	0.558	1.709
Highschool or less (Reference)				
Self-rated health	-1.555 *	0.661	0.847	0.695
Current income: Self	3.326	3.045	14.59 ***	3.699
Current income: Husband	-9.572 **	3.103		
Current income: Parents	2.585	3.113	2.893 †	1.503
Current income: Other family members	-7.888 †	4.015	0.074	2.495
Current income : Pension	1.782	3.416	-4.595 *	2.324
Current income: Unemployment insurance	-14.515	13.625		
Current income : Savings	-3.098	3.812	0.026	3.801
Current income : Social welfare	-4.329	5.376	-7.107 †	3.659
Current income : Rental income	6.927	7.429	0.721	7.141
Current income : Other	7.355	9.375	-9.186	8.212
Adjusted Rsquare	0.039		0.107	
F	2.069		3.499	
Significance	0.009		0.000	
N	423		292	

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In Table 2, the dependent variable is weekly work hours (sum of “main work” and “additional work”), and independent variables are age, squared age, number of children, education, self-rated health, and sources of income.

According to the hypotheses 1, married mothers who have many children and poor health conditions reduce their work hours, while single mothers who have many children and poor health conditions do not. The findings from Table 2 support the hypotheses. For married mothers, the number of children significantly (though at 10% level) reduces work hours. Also, for them, poor self-rated health significantly reduces work hours. For single mothers, neither the number of children nor self-rated health is significantly related to work hours.

Other sources of income also reduce work hours. For married mothers, the income of husbands and other family members reduces their work hours (although the latter is

significant at 10% level). For single mothers, parent's income (significant at 10% level), pension, and social welfare significantly reduce work hours.

4.2. Determinants of Self-rated Health

Inversely, this section analyzes the determinants of health for Japanese single and married women.

Table 3: The determinants of Self-rated Health

	Married		Single	
	B	S. E.	B	S. E.
Constant	3.653 †	1.884	5.496 ***	1.174
Age	0.026	0.096	-0.111	0.073
Squared age	-0.001	0.001	0.002	0.001
Number of children	0.128	0.139	0.769 ***	0.256
Junior college	-0.025	0.119	-0.027	0.156
University/ Graduage School	0.193	0.142	-0.024	0.161
Highschool or less (Reference)				
Current income: Self	-0.295	0.258	-0.702 *	0.335
Current income: Husband	0.022	0.269		
Current income: Parents	0.169	0.258	0.203	0.143
Current income: Other family members	0.065	0.337	-0.196	0.225
Current income : Pension	-0.093	0.273	-0.08	0.208
Current income: Unemployment insurance	-1.876 †	1.027		
Current income : Savings	0.341	0.288	-0.571	0.364
Current income : Social welfare	1.002 *	0.435	-0.789 *	0.336
Current income : Rental income	-0.774	0.556	0.696	0.713
Current income : Other	-1.564 *	0.701	-0.018	0.690
Work Hours	-0.003	0.009	0.01	0.006
Interaction Number of Children*Work	-0.003	0.004	-0.017 **	0.006
Self Income	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.001
Adjusted Rsquare	0.038		0.040	
F	1.829		1.639	
Significance	0.021		0.060	
N	375		248	

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

This section tests Hypothesis 2 (As childrearing responsibilities and work hours increase, single mothers' health condition suffers, while that of their married counterparts does not). The results presented in Table 3 support this hypothesis. The

interaction between the number of children and work hours is not significant for married mothers, while negatively significant for single mothers.

Thus, for married mothers, working long hours and having many children do not affect health, while they do so negatively for single mothers. Single mothers suffer from the double burden of work and childrearing probably because while married mothers can reduce work hours when their work and home responsibilities are high, single mothers do not have this option.

5. Discussion

This study elucidates the structural constraints imposed on single mothers, the group of people whose lifestyles are not compatible with traditional gender and family values of Japan. Not conforming to the ideal trajectory of wifedom and motherhood articulated by Japanese gender and family ideology, they are punished financially and socially. Japanese welfare capitalism hinders rather than helps them fulfill their responsibilities of child rearing by denying them access to social welfare benefits, gainful employment opportunities, and paternal child support. They have little choice but to work long hours to make ends meet while raising children even when they have health issues, and even when health issues result from this burden of overwork.

The results of the analysis support our hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 (The working hours of married mothers respond to two factors: their health and the number of children they have. Single mothers do not reduce their work hours in response to either of these factors.) was supported.

The results also supported hypothesis 2 (As childrearing responsibilities and work hours increase, single mothers' health condition deteriorates, while their married counterparts' does not). The interaction term of the number of children and work hours has significant negative effects on single mothers' health, but not on married mothers' health.

Our analysis confirms the link between single mothers' dual exclusion from the labor market and the welfare state and their inability to adjust work hours in response to their family responsibilities and health. They are subject to social constraints rooted in gender and family values that require women to be wives and mothers, preferably subservient to and financially dependent on their husbands. There is no place in this ideology for independent women who can be solely responsible for rearing their children. Within the bounds of its logic and its practice, independent single mothers are anomalies who deserve their problems, whether poverty or ill health or both.

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