

Unmarried Daughters as Family Caregivers: Evolving Family Relationships, Gender Order, and Singlehood in Japan

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(Abstract) This study is based on an ethnography of daughters taking care of their parents in Tokyo, Japan. I focus on the allocation of caregiving responsibilities for elderly parents among their children, especially in terms of its effects on unmarried daughters and its impact on the “singlehood” of unmarried women. As in South Korea, research on singlehood in Japan has proceeded from the concerns with childbirth and reproduction, largely focusing on revealing singlehood’s causes. However, in order to improve our understanding of the phenomena of increased life expectancy and non-marriage as well as the overall demographic trend toward an aging society, it is necessary to adjust the perspective of singlehood research. Therefore, in this study I attempt to portray the lives of unmarried individuals by describing the family relationships of unmarried, middle-aged women, especially unmarried daughters caring for their parents. Through this approach, I will expand the scope of singlehood research to include those engaged in family life that is actually happening rather than focusing on marriages that never took place. This approach can provide useful implications for understanding the changes in family relationships and gender order that are occurring in an aging society with a high prevalence of singlehood.

Primary research data was collected through an on-site survey in Tokyo, which was conducted for 18 months at monthly meetings for daughters taking care of their parents. The first step in the study was to understand what makes unmarried daughters the most suitable individuals for taking care of their parents. In particular, I paid attention to disparities in the allocation of caregiving responsibilities among children, according to gender and marital

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status. The second step in the study involved observing how daughters are pressured to become good caregivers. My focus here was on the strained relationships between caregiving daughters and care-receiving mothers and on the conflicts surrounding the work-caregiving balance. Furthermore, in this study I highlight the agency of unmarried women as they traverse the gender order. I trace the ways in which unmarried female caregivers facing diverse hardships are gaining a public voice while restructuring their “singlehood.” And I explore how such efforts create gaps and possibilities within the family-based social system and the male-centered gender order.

1. Introduction: The Need for Studies of Singlehood that Focus on the Lives of Single People

The aim of this study is to examine changes in life course and gender order among Japanese women by focusing on unmarried women¹ who care for their parents. This phenomenon exists against the background of demographic changes in postwar Japanese society, namely fewer marriages occurring later in life, low birthrates, and an aging population. Until the 1970s, Japan was a “universal marriage society” (皆婚社会 *kaikon shakai*), in which almost all people got married at least once during their lives, and those who did not were often not treated as adults. But today the country is a powerhouse of singlehood: the rate of singles in their fifties who have never been married stands at 23.4 percent for men and 14.1 percent for women. Meanwhile, the average age of first marriage has risen from 26.2 and 23.6 for men and women, respectively, in 1950, to 31.1 and 29.4 in 2015.²

The gradually increasing rate of singlehood, pushed up by falling rates of marriage and coupled with the social norm of not having children outside marriage, has led to the problem of a low birth rate in Japanese society. Moreover, the decreasing number of marriages means a decline in the number of housewives, the all-round caregivers once praised by the Japanese government as “Japanese welfare’s hidden assets.” Therefore, while

¹ In this article, the term “unmarried women” is used to designate women above the age of 35 with no spouse or children, regardless of any previous, different marital status.

² See National Census (2015). The lifelong singlehood rate is calculated as an average of the rate of singlehood in the 45–49 and 50–54 years age brackets and indicates never having been legally married at the age of 50.

the increase in single men is attributed to economic depression, increasing numbers of single women tends to be highlighted as a cause of the social problems bringing about low birth rates and a lack of caregivers.

At the same time, when it comes to the lives of unmarried people, in middle age and beyond, the effects of an aging society cannot be overlooked. In 2015, elderly citizens accounted for 26.7 percent of Japan's total population; approximately half of these were aged 75 or above. Amid the combination of a rapidly aging society and incomplete defamilialization of family caregiving, the care burden on younger generations is growing.³ It appears that 11.1 percent of Japanese in their 40s and 17.8 percent between the ages of 50 and 64 look after a parent.⁴ In the lives of unmarried women, caring for parents has long been almost as important as working and aging. This shows both that they are not free from the bonds of family relationships and that their femininity, in a way, has been subsumed by the existing gender order.

The term *bikon* (非婚 non-marriage, unmarried) first appeared in Japan in the 1980s. At first it was used only rarely, to describe the proliferation of a new form of sexual union, unrestricted by legal marriage—a Western phenomenon. Later, amid the “single boom”⁵ and the sensation caused by books such as Yoshihiro Kiyoko's works *Hikon jidai* (非婚時代 [The age of singlehood] (1987)) and *Otoko-tachi no bikon jidai* (男たちの非婚時代 [The age of singlehood for men] (1988)), the term began acquiring wider acceptance as a criticism of the oppressive nature of conventional family and marriage systems and to denote deliberate refusal of these things.

With the spread of population crisis theory in the 1990s, however, the concept of *bikon* started appearing frequently in government documents and media in conjunction with the topic of low birth rates. As marriage avoidance came to be cited as the primary cause of population decline, positive discourse regarding singlehood as the manifestation of a new age

³ In terms of age group, 63.7 percent of individuals in their 40s had two surviving parents, and nine of ten had at least one living parent. Additionally, 83.3 percent of those aged 50–54, 66.0 percent of those aged 55–59 and 41.4 percent of those aged 60–64 had at least one living parent. See National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2015a.

⁴ See Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare 2010.

⁵ This refers to the flood of content and marketing in the 1980s using the then-fashionable English word “single” to indicate voluntary singlehood. Phrases commonly used included “singles,” “single woman,” and “single life.”

and expanding personal choices began to wane. The concept was realigned as a cause of the declining total fertility rate and shrinking population. Concerns emerged that a sustained low birth rate⁶ might reduce the population to a level where it was unable to support society, producing a “limited society” in a crisis of not being able to reproduce itself (Yoshimi Sunya 2013: 225). In this climate, it was almost inevitable that positive narratives about *hikon* would fade into oblivion.

In this study, I intend to focus on the current family lives of unmarried people—their relationships, in other words, with their blood families—an area that has been little addressed, in comparison to the studies of marriages they have not had. Within this subject, I pay particular attention to the dynamics of gender and marital status surrounding the division and fulfillment of parent caregiving duties among children.

To this end, I conducted an 18-month field study in Tokyo from 2011 to 2013, carrying out fieldwork principally at gatherings of individuals who care for their parents. In this article, I will use analysis of ethnographic data to reveal the dynamics of how gender order based on heterosexual unions, gender-based division of labor, and patriarchy all draw unmarried daughters into parental caregiving.

2. Unmarried Daughters Called upon as Caregivers amid Caregiving Reforms

1) *The Fall of Caregiving by Daughters-in-Law and the Rise of Children as Carers*

When an elderly person requires care, who should provide it? Since the 1980s, a growing number of people have come to regard elder care as the role of the state and society. But the government’s response to demands for defamilialized caregiving has been slow and half-baked. Though the situation has improved since the introduction of the Long-term Care Insurance (LTCI) system in 2000, it cannot be said that the family

⁶ Having reached a pinnacle of 3.65 in 1950, the fertility rate fell to 1.75 in 1980 and 1.57 in 1989, well below the 2.1 that constitutes replacement-level fertility in a country that does not admit immigrants. The fertility rate sank further, to 1.26, in 2005, before rising again slightly to 1.46 in 2015. See yearly national census data.

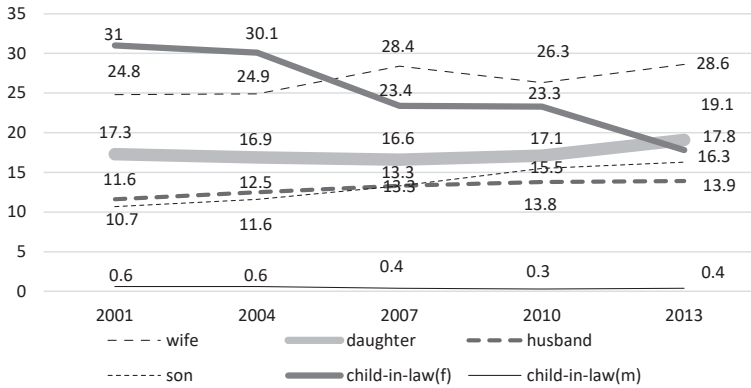


Figure 1. Live-in caregivers according to family relationship type

caregiving burden has been fundamentally alleviated; it remains heavy. Those in need of care are still highly dependent on their families.⁷

The introduction of the LTCI system brought extensive change to the identity of caregivers. There was a noticeable reduction in the number of daughters-in-law acting as caregivers, a quasi-institutionalized role they had long been forced into. As Figure 1 shows, the proportion of daughters-in-law among cohabiting primary caregivers fell from 31.0 percent in 2000 to 17.8 percent in 2013. This striking decline was accompanied by an increase of caregiving by spouses and children. The number of elderly people looking after another elderly person grew, as did the number of both daughters and sons caring for parents, and this became more firmly established as a social norm. These changes in family caregiving are important from the perspective of the shifting gender order. In particular, the striking increase in male caregivers has drawn attention to changing views of Japanese masculinity; men previously left caregiving to women and devoted themselves solely to the role of breadwinner (Ji Eunsuk 2014). At the same time, however, the facts that the number of caregiving wives and daughters is increasing, and 67 percent of all caregivers are still female,

⁷ The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s 2013 Basic survey of the lives of Japanese people shows that only 14.8 percent of self-employed individuals in households with elderly residents requiring care answered that they were the principal caregiver. 21.1 percent of those requiring care responded that they did not use long-term care insurance services; 47.1 percent said that this was “because family members were muddling through among themselves.”

cannot be overlooked. Even as family caregivers grow more diverse, the structure of gender-based role divisions that assign caregiving roles primarily to women remains in place. In this study, I focus on the fact that the expectation of caregiving by daughters is increasing and that daughters account for a major proportion of caregiving family members.

As the number of caregiving daughters-in-law has declined, actual daughters have been earmarked as ideal caregivers. Working in the background here is the conventional notion that daughters, unlike daughters-in-law, possess a natural love for their parents and, free from social norms, can provide reciprocal care based on gratitude. But a previous study comparing daughter-in-law and daughter caregivers (Long, Campbell, and Nishimura 2009) indicated that not all daughters-in-law gave care against their will and not all daughters provided it voluntarily. Additionally, they found that when it came to stress and negative emotions, such as anger and resentment, experienced by caregivers vis-à-vis care receivers, daughters felt a greater burden than daughters-in-law and were placed in a more psychologically vulnerable state. With reference to previous studies, I intend to investigate daughters' experiences of caring for their parents and, in so doing, to reveal a clearer picture of the realigning gender order in the realm of elder caregiving.

2) Unmarried Daughters Hailed as the Ideal Parental Caregivers

Among siblings, it is nothing new for unmarried daughters to take more responsibility for looking after their parents. After World War II, many war widows looked after their elderly parents. Unmarried women have "brought up the rear" for the modern family, looking after the elderly parents excluded from the latter. But around the year 2000, a notable change occurred: the expectation for unmarried daughters to care for parents became overt. In the past, it was not regarded as good form for an unmarried daughter with siblings to look after her parents, and parents were expected to ensure their daughter married, at all costs, for the sake of her future. But the weakening of social norms regarding marriage, and the smaller number of caregivers due to falling numbers of children, have led to a change whereby unmarried daughters are now earmarked as ideal candidates for looking after their parents.

In a sense, it has become even desirable for unmarried daughters to look after their parents. Especially in cases where an unmarried daughter



Figure 2. Us, 30 years later [Source: Akizuki, Risu. 2013. *OL Shinkaron*. 121]



Figure 3. Preparing for the future [Source: *OL Shinkaron*. 125]

has lived with her parents for a long time, becoming their caregiver is regarded as a natural progression. However, that does not mean that leaving home at a younger age and living independently make it easy for unmarried women to escape expectations of caregiving. Figures 2 and 3 are good illustrations of this phenomenon.

Figure 2 shows a single woman meeting her future sister-in-law, the fiancée of her younger brother, for the first time. The final ellipsis effectively says, “please look after your parents since you’re their single daughter.” The older woman has picked up on what her future sister-in-law is implying but is unable to give an answer and reacts with embarrassment. While this psychological battle over parental caregiving unfolds between the two women, the man, an actual blood relative of the parents, is effaced from the scene altogether. This implies how, among

siblings that include unmarried women in their number, married sons are somehow exempt from parental caregiving duties.

Meanwhile, Figure 3 shows the gap in expectations between parents and unmarried daughters—the object of these expectations—when it comes to caregiving. An unmarried daughter is visiting her parents, who have just rebuilt their house. The mother tells her daughter that the newly built house has had a guestroom added. The daughter scolds her mother, mistakenly thinking that the guestroom has been built for her older brother and his family. The mother is unable to admit that the room was, in fact, built to make it easier for her unmarried daughter to move in later on, when the parents need looking after. This scene shows how the parents' expectations of caregiving from their unmarried daughter have heightened, unbeknownst to the daughter herself.

The designation of unmarried women as parental caregivers, as shown in these images, demonstrates an interesting change in the relationship between different types of femininity, which have long been demarcated by marriage. Women's lives were broadly divided into two types: the majority lived as housewives, prioritizing housework and caregiving, while a minority lived lives "like men," remaining unmarried and prioritizing their work. Until the 1970s, the general perception was that married women lived as dependents, but unmarried women lived "hard" lives, in which they had to support themselves. But the rising number of married, working women made it gradually harder to divide married and unmarried lives in terms of employment and dependency. In place of this traditional distinction, a contrast emerged between married women stretched by both employment and caregiving, and unmarried women who worked only in paid jobs while enjoying lives of elegant consumption.

In societies where heterosexual union is regarded as a basic condition for a desirable life, the femininity of unmarried women represents a resistant strain, opposing emphasized femininity. Single women in the postwar period built an economically independent, unmarried femininity by resisting housewifely, husband-dependent femininity within the dependence-independence dichotomy. And women in the era of booming singlehood emphasized their individuality through non-marriage, in contrast to the family-centeredness of married women (Ji Eunsuk 2016b). But from the perspective of emphasized femininity, where maternity and caregiving are placed above all else, the femininity of unmarried women was nothing more than a conceptual antipode; the two were not in

confrontation or competition within the process of life. In fact, it was the femininity of economically independent, married working women that competed with that of housewives.

But the caregiving vacuum that formed amid rapid social aging and changing family structures has triggered the emergence of a new intersection and line of conflict between married and unmarried women. Change is occurring to the line dividing the femininities of married and unmarried women when it comes to caregiving responsibilities. When the young fiancée in Figure 2 looks at her future sister-in-law, and when the mother in Figure 3 looks at her daughter, they see not women living lives of “hardship,” having to fend for themselves, but “women exempt from caregiving duties”—people who are women but do not look after anyone. If the previous view of unmarried women strongly implied that they were “unfortunate,” “poor,” or examples of how not to end up, this focus on caregiving, rather than dependence or employment, can be interpreted as a change that grants unmarried women an equal status. But it is easy to overlook the fact that an increased caregiving burden imposes various difficulties and changes on an unmarried working life in which caregiving was not previously posited. Yet more problematic is the fact that the negative aspects of being an unmarried carer have not even entered public discourse.

3. Discourses and Orders Regarding Division of Parental Caregiving Responsibilities among Siblings

In this section, I examine the dynamics created in caregiving responsibilities by gender and marital status among siblings, based on field data gathered from a group of daughters who care for their parents. My main questions are: How do daughters become parental caregivers? What narratives do they use to describe their caregiving relationships and situations? And how are gender and singlehood entwined with these questions?

1) *Musume Salon*.⁸ *A Public Forum for Daughters Caring for Parents*

Musume Salon is a self-help group supported by Aladdin,⁹ an organization that supports family caregiver groups. While self-help groups for family members caring for elderly people are generally region-based and place no restrictions on participation as a matter of principle, Musume Salon claims to be exclusively for daughters caring for parents and operates on a national basis.

I participated as an observer in 16 Musume Salon meetings between May 2012 and August 2013 and conducted interviews with key participants at the “Carer’s Café”¹⁰ run by the salon. The group had a total of 143 members, with 58 participants and an average of 8.9 participants per meeting. The average age of participants was around 50, the youngest aged 28 and the oldest aged 72, indicating how women of all ages are caring for parents. Slightly more of the 58 participants were married than unmarried.¹¹ Married and unmarried participants showed striking differences in terms of their reasons for participating and their interests. In many cases, the interest of married members was focused on caregiving itself. These members responded more actively to conversation topics relating to information about caregiving services or to technical and emotional difficulties arising in caregiving relationships. By contrast, unmarried members often talked about economic hardship and difficulty of combining employment and caregiving.

In terms of type of caregiving, around 70 percent of members lived with the parents they looked after, a figure similar to the general trend whereby more than 60 percent of primary caregivers live with elderly care recipients.¹² The reason most often given for daughters becoming primary

⁸ *Musume* means “daughter” in Japanese. Musume Salon began in May 2010 and was still in operation as of February 2017.

⁹ A non-profit foundation formed in 2000 that supports family caregivers. Its official name is “NPO法人介護者サポートネットワークセンター・アラジン” (“Non-profit corporation Aladdin carer support network center”) <http://arajin-care.net>.

¹⁰ The Carer’s Café is a space run by Aladdin for caregivers. It opened in April 2012, selling simple meals and tea and hosting courses for carers. Its official name is Carer’s cafe & dining. Website: <http://cafe-arajin.com>.

¹¹ Because Musume Salon keeps no list of members and has no particular joining procedures or rules, it was difficult to obtain the personal details of all participants.

¹² Cabinet Office 2016.

caregivers was that there was no one else to do it. This reason was cited most frequently not just by only children but by those with siblings too. Most narratives held that daughters had naturally become primary caregivers since they had been around when their parents needed care, or they ended up giving long-term care after assuming a leading role when the need for care arose.

Musume Salon was run on an open basis, with 18 core members who had taken part in at least three meetings, of whom 12 were unmarried. This group of unmarried women was forthright in expressing their opinions at the salon and regularly visited the Carer's Café, taking part in other activities there.

Table 1 contains basic personal information about the 12 unmarried women who had attended Musume Salon at least three times. With an average age of 43, all 12 of them were daughters deeply involved in caring for their parents. Four of them looked after both parents at once, while three others expected that their other parent would soon need looking after in addition to the one they were already caring for. Three of the 12 were in regular employment; all three unanimously said how hard it was to maintain regular jobs while living with and caring for their parents. Five of the 12 women fell into the unemployed category. One, Kurotsu, had never entered the labor market due to maladjustment issues, and another, Kakijima, had taken early retirement; the remaining three had taken temporary leave when their parents started receiving care but had remained unemployed as they became primary caregivers. All three wanted to work again and were seeking new jobs that they could do while caring for their parents.

All the women said they would get married if they met someone, with the exception of Kakijima, a divorcee. At the same time, however, they described the likelihood of this happening as low because it is hard to meet someone while caring for parents, and they did not know how long they would remain care providers. They were more interested in how to combine their current caregiving responsibilities with preparation for their future outside of marriage.

The structure of each meeting followed a similar pattern. Since there were always new members at the meetings, self-introductions often ended up taking a long time. After this, participants chose and talked about topics that interested them, in the absence of a predetermined subject. Topics ranged widely according to the mood of the day, from technical caregiving issues, such as how to change diapers, to criticism of the Japanese

Age	Siblings	Education level	Marital status	Employment history	Employment status at time of study	Caregiving history	Caregiving arrangement
28	1 brother (unmarried)	4-yr college	Never married	6 yrs as childcare worker	In regular employment	Mother 1 yr	Cohabiting
38	3 brothers (unmarried)	2-yr college	Never married	8 yrs as teaching assistant and company worker	Unemployed	Mother 6 yrs; father 2 yrs	Cohabiting
45	1 brother (married)	2-yr college + technical college	Never married	10 yrs as company worker	Unemployed	Mother 4 yrs	Cohabiting
42	1 sister (married)	2-yr college	Never married	17 yrs as a company worker	Unemployed	Father/mother 4 yrs	Cohabiting
43	1 sister (married)	4-yr college	Never married	16 yrs as a company worker	In irregular employment	Mother 12 yrs	Cohabiting
43	1 brother (unmarried)	4-yr college	Never married	15 yrs as a company worker	In regular employment	Mother 5 yrs	Living far apart
40	None	High school	Never married	None	Unemployed	Mother 4 yrs	Cohabiting
42	None	High school	Never married	20 yrs as a company worker	In regular employment	Mother 6 yrs	Cohabiting
43	1 sister (married); 1 brother (married)	Master's degree	Never married	Lived in Thailand for a long period	Self-employed	Mother 3 yrs	Cohabiting
51	1 brother (unmarried)	2-yr college	Never married	20 yrs as a company worker	In irregular employment	Mother 6 yrs; father 3 yrs	Mother: institution; father: cohabiting
47	1 brother (unmarried)	High school	Widowed	25 yrs as a company worker	In irregular employment	Mother 9 yrs; father 5 yrs	Mother: institution; father: living close-by
53	1 brother (married)	4-yr college	Divorced	17 yrs as a company worker	Unemployed	Mother 4 yrs	Mother: in a nearby institution

Table 1. Personal details of the 12 unmarried women who had attended Musume Salon at least three times

government's elderly care policies and Japan's family culture. Through these discussions, it was revealed that most participants in Musume Salon would have avoided caring for their parents if it had been possible. Those with other siblings, in particular, always harbored latent dissatisfaction in a corner of their minds about becoming primary caregivers. As a result, "Why me?" was a frequently recurring topic at the salon, adding import to the circumstances of all the participants and functioning as a conversation starter.

2) Gender Asymmetry in the Allocation of Caregiving Responsibilities

The first fact to be pointed out when addressing gender asymmetry in elderly caregiving responsibilities is that the social norm of daughters-in-law giving care has merely weakened: it has not disappeared. For a long time, married women were governed by the norm dictating that they should put their parents-in-law before their own parents. The establishment of the LTCI system generated social support for the principle of looking after one's own parents, leading to changes that made it harder than before to coerce daughters-in-law into the role of elder caregiver. But these changes have functioned as a double-edged sword for married women: the reduction in daughters-in-law as quasi-institutionalized caregivers brought an increased caregiving burden for daughters looking after their own parents. Among the married daughters caring for parents at Musume Salon, several had replaced male siblings as primary caregivers because the latter's wives did not get on with their parents-in-law or refused to care for them. In many such cases, the question of who would look after the care recipient had led to sharp disputes, causing relationships among siblings to collapse.

When parents of several children lose their capacity for independent life, their children sometimes decide on a caregiving roster or divide responsibility for supporting their parents. But even when roles are divided this way, and no primary caregiver is appointed, one child still ends up taking on the whole role; in general, it is a daughter. The main cause of such situations is apathy or a passive attitude on the part of male siblings. Though there are now more male primary caregivers than in the past, gender still serves as a powerful excuse for sons to avoid caregiving responsibility in cases where they have sisters or the parent requiring care is the mother. When productivity or rationality-based criteria are added and

used to argue that the sibling with the lowest income should leave paid employment and give care, then arguments for gender-based division—claims that women are better suited to caring for parents, and caring is a woman's role—are complete. This effect is even more pronounced when the woman involved is unmarried.

Case 1: Inoue, 28, Unmarried Woman, No Sisters, One Brother

Inoue lived in Tokyo with her older brother, a company worker, and was a childcare worker. One day, while talking on the telephone to her mother in Nagano, she realized that something was wrong with her. She immediately arranged for her to be taken to hospital as an emergency patient and rushed to Nagano with her brother. Her mother survived the stroke but suffered reduced cognitive ability due to brain damage, showing symptoms of aphasia, and she lost the ability to walk unaided. Inoue's relatives advised her not to go back to Tokyo but to look for a job in Nagano. Her father, who had retired a few months previously, also wanted her to return to Nagano. But for Inoue, who had planned her life in Tokyo, this was hard to accept. She discussed it with her brother. He said that their father would find it difficult to look after their mother properly because he was a man, emphasizing that their mother would be more comfortable "with a woman." He advised Inoue to return to Nagano, saying that his job was only possible in Tokyo, while hers could be done anywhere. Inoue agreed that her mother would be more comfortable with another woman but could not accept the argument that it didn't matter where she worked. She decided to leave her father in Nagano and take her mother back to Tokyo with her. Inoue's brother, despite having stressed that their mother would feel more comfortable being looked after by another woman, often tells her that she, "a woman," would be a more appropriate caregiver for their father too.

Meanwhile, the case of Shinobu shows that, when it comes to sharing caregiving responsibilities between sons and daughters, arguments of rationality and efficiency—such as living closer to parents and having more time—are not consistently applied.

Case 2: Shinobu, 41, Unmarried Woman, No Sisters, One Brother

Shinobu is an IT engineer. She comes from Iwate Prefecture, where her parents and unmarried older brother still live in their hometown. Five years ago, her mother collapsed with a cerebral infarction (stroke) and became paralyzed on one side of her body. Shinobu's father is her mother's primary caregiver. Her older brother, who lives with them, has refused to give either the help or the money needed to care for his parents. In 2011, as their father was just about coping with all the housework and caregiving, Iwate was rocked by the Tōhoku earthquake. Though Shinobu's family suffered no direct damage, her parents received a strong emotional shock. Then, her

mother was operated on for colorectal cancer, and her father's health deteriorated. Shinobu applied for a year's caregiving leave and returned to Iwate. For one year, she looked after her mother while receiving family counseling in an effort to change her brother's mind. But he bullied her, saying, "I won't look after them, so don't do anything either." At the end of the year, she still had not persuaded him. While she was deliberating quitting her job, unable to leave her parents as they were, it was her mother who persuaded her to go back to Tokyo. She has come back for now but thinks it will be hard for her to stay in the capital much longer in these circumstances.

As Figure 1 shows, there has been a noticeable increase in the proportion of male family caregivers. In reality, however, this increase has not been as natural or smooth as the statistical curves representing it. When seen from the frontlines of family care, the increase in male caregivers has been a turbulent process generated by countless family skirmishes over who will provide care. Conflict between married daughters and unmarried sons has been particularly fierce.

Case 3: Michiko, 50s, Married Woman, One Brother

Michiko's unmarried younger brother lives with their mother, who is diabetic. Michiko is married and lives apart from them but is her mother's primary caregiver. After her mother, who already had mobility problems, lost her eyesight, Michiko spent a few months rushing back and forth between her home, her mother's home, and her workplace. Every day before going to work, she dropped in to see her mother, check her blood sugar level, give her medicine and injections, and prepare breakfast. Then Michiko went to work. After work, she went shopping, looked after her mother, then went home to her own place. One day, when she thought she had reached her physical limit, she asked her younger brother to at least help out in the morning. He refused to get involved, saying, "I'll do it if you collapse." Then, Michiko collapsed from overwork and was taken to hospital in an ambulance. After that, she says, her brother looked after their mother in the mornings.

Complaints about brothers who are uncooperative or refuse to give care, and discussions of how to make them into "proper" caregivers, were a frequently recurring topic at Musume Salon. Daughters' indignation and lamentations about this sometimes led to psychoanalysis of men scared of seeing their parents become senile or to gripes that "having no siblings at all would be better."

Since the early 2000s in Japan, the perception that children, rather than their spouses, should look after their own parents has gained widespread social acceptance, at least in terms of norms. Though there may be

dissatisfaction, it is now hard to express the view that daughters-in-law have a duty to be caregivers. But when it comes to gender norms, the situation is different. Despite the numerical increase in male caregivers, it is hard to take the view that gender norms, based on role divisions holding that women and daughters make more suitable caregivers than men and sons, are steadily and irreversibly weakening.

3) *The Dual Structure of Family Caregiving: Married Children Caring for Families and Unmarried Children Caring for Parents*

As mentioned above, several married daughters at Musume Salon had come to replace other siblings as primary caregivers. By contrast, hardly any unmarried daughters had replaced other siblings in this way. Most unmarried daughter primary caregivers had been in their roles from the start or had taken it over from their other parent. This shows a clear difference from the process by which war widows became primary caregivers in the past. While some war widows were primary caregivers from the start, many took over the role from other siblings (Ji Eunsuk 2016a). This illustrates how the designation of unmarried daughters as parental caregivers is not merely a solution born out of circumstance but is becoming established as a norm.

For unmarried daughters themselves, it came as a source of great pressure when their siblings took it for granted that they should become principal carers. Kumashiro described her discontent and fear about this situation as follows.

Case 4: Kumashiro, 45, Unmarried Woman, No Sisters, One Brother

After living with and caring for her mother for four years, Kumashiro was exhausted. When her father started showing signs of dementia, she was filled with anxiety. She wanted to leave home, fearing that if she didn't, she would become her father's primary caregiver, just as she had been for her mother. Her older brother and his wife merely visited like guests, never helping out. But Kumashiro had no job, and her mental and physical exhaustion left her with no confidence to live alone. She ended by saying, "I'd like to get married. If anyone knows a good man, please introduce us."

For Kumashiro, asking others to arrange for her to meet a man must have seemed like a solution plucked from her sense of despair, but it was not an appropriate thing to say at Musume Salon. The room froze over for a minute, then somebody tried to move the conversation along with a joke.

But Kumashiro persisted, saying, "I wasn't really joking. I was serious." Another awkward silence ensued. Then, another participant, aged about 50, interjected: "If you think getting married means your husband will help with caregiving, forget it. You'll be lucky if he just stays faithful to you." She then revealed how her husband had cheated on her while she was caring for her mother, eventually leading to divorce. The atmosphere suddenly took on a new energy. A flood of opinions poured out about the difficulties of combining parental caregiving with married life, and the conversation ended with the conclusion that getting married was not a way out of looking after parents.

There were two competing strands of narrative here. One was that of an unmarried daughter, who said that caring for a parent had ruined her life and was desperately looking for a way out because it seemed that her situation would only get worse. The other was that of a married daughter, who said that looking after her parents had led to the breakup of her own family. On one side was an individual narrative; on the other, that of a family. On the question of which narrative better illustrated the destructive effects of parental caregiving on the lives of daughters, collective opinion at Musume Salon leaned clearly toward the latter. Married women at the salon often gave opinions based on a clear premise that unmarried daughters should take more responsibility than married daughters when it came to parental care. This sometimes acted as a force to deter unmarried women from speaking. It was therefore hard for unmarried women to join in a discussion in which married women were taking the lead. On this occasion, too, there were several unmarried daughters present in addition to Kumashiro. But despite the clash of narratives between unmarried and married daughters, they stayed out of the fight and watched from the sidelines.

The injustice manifested in caregiving role division among married and unmarried children is a prime example of a topic where married women avoided talking and unmarried women were unable to talk freely. For example, if an unmarried woman expressed discontent, saying, "It makes me angry how my mother avoids calling my married older sister and depends on me for everything. We're both her daughters," others tended to placate her by saying things like, "That's because your mother feels more comfortable with you and closer to you." The unresponsiveness and trivialization shown by married women at Musume Salon whenever unmarried daughters spoke of the burden of parental care gave the

impression that the former considered it obvious that the latter should take a greater share of responsibility for such caregiving, and they did not consider this something worth discussing. But no one ever said this explicitly. As a sincerely held belief, it must have been hard to state aloud because the view that unmarried women should naturally give care was ultimately rooted in the gender norm holding up women as more suitable caregivers. This is why caregiving pressure from married women vis-à-vis their unmarried counterparts was exerted in silence. Married daughters merely say, "I can't do it"; they don't put their unmarried siblings under direct pressure by saying, "You do it."

Why, then, do unmarried daughters give in to this silent pressure? Almost half the participants at Musume Salon were unmarried women, many of whom were unhappy being seen as the most suitable sibling for parental caregiving because of their unmarried status: why, despite this, could they not actively speak up about it? Answers must be sought in the ideological prestige of the family, seen in Japanese society as a value to be pursued and maintained. Ever since the Meiji Restoration, the family has been venerated by politicians as the foundation and strength underpinning Japanese society, while rhetoric asserting that "the collapse of the family means the collapse of society" has functioned as the pervasive ruling logic of postwar Japan. Indeed, this family-based logic allowed the formation of the social consensus for defamilialization of elderly caregiving from the 1990s: a sense of crisis that the role of daughter-in-law was undermining those of wife and mother, threatening the very foundations of the family, played an important role in winning social agreement on the LTCI system.

This family-based logic is also at work in the distribution of caregiving responsibilities among siblings. This establishes a dual structure in family care, whereby unmarried children must look after parents so that their married siblings can sustain society by raising families. Unmarried women at Musume Salon did not possess the language needed to resist this structure, leaving them with no choice but to remain silent. They blamed their unreasonable situations on their own failure to get married or on personal misfortune, struggling to think of ways to rectify the unfair distribution of caregiving responsibilities other than the personal solution of marriage. But their repeated slip-ups and setbacks in the public sphere and, above all, the real difficulties that they must endure, are creating a situation that makes unmarried female caregivers realize their position and speak about it.

4. Competition and Reconstructed Singlehood with Regard to “Good Caregiving”

In this section, I begin by examining the sense of solidarity that forms among daughters caring for parents. I then analyze how this reveals cracks in situations where a choice must be made between work and caregiving. Next, I turn to situations where the logic that self-sacrificial caregiving is good and desirable is still applied to parental caregiving by unmarried women, and I determine how unmarried women are reconstructing their singlehood in response.

1) Solidarity among Daughters in Distress: Mothers Who Dominate Relationships while Receiving Care

Caring for parents is forced labor. But today, when the coercion is no longer legally enforceable, children cannot be called upon as caregivers if they feel no love or responsibility for their parents. The notion that sons look after their parents through a sense of responsibility, while love plays a bigger role in the case of daughters, is often held as common sense. But no credible studies suggest a clear gender difference when it comes to love and responsibility in the consciousness of parental caregivers. It is probably right to view this notion as one that conforms to ideals of femininity and masculinity.

Where differences actually are apparent is in the gender of the parent being cared for. The attitudes of caregiving children differ clearly according to whether it is their father or their mother being looked after. When it is the latter, caregiving children, daughters and sons alike, expect her to show “motherly instinct.” Hardly any children expect fatherly instinct when caring for their father. But in most cases, children’s expectations of maternal instinct from their mothers go unmet. Their mothers have changed too much. The mother for whom they are caring is not the person who once ran the household and always looked after the family. She has lost the ability to do housework and, in many cases, has become harsh and bad-tempered. The expectation of maternal instinct makes it even harder for children to accept these changes in their mother.

Both daughters and sons are taken aback by their mother’s lack of maternal instinct. But while men do not fundamentally regard the change in their mothers as their own fault, women sometimes feel disheartened,

believing it is because they are not good daughters. This is why some daughters devote themselves so fully to their mothers that they are accused of “over-caring.” I never heard a caregiving son say he wanted to do as much for his mother as she had done for him. Yet this narrative often cropped up at gatherings of caregiving daughters. But plans to look after one’s mother as well as she looked after oneself often end in dejection when the mother does not appreciate anything that is done for her.

Case 5: Morizumi, 50, Unmarried Woman, No Sisters, One Brother

“I only fed you tasty food when you were young,” Morizumi’s mother used to say. The two had a good relationship. When her father collapsed, Morizumi left her full-time job, with its frequent business trips, and became a freelancer in order to help her mother. When her father died, her mother collapsed and ended up in need of care. Morizumi stopped all her work and went home. She had a younger brother who was divorced and lived alone, but he just acted like an occasional visitor and had no intention of helping with caregiving; his mother did not want him to, either. While looking after her mother at home, Morizumi developed cancer. After being operated on, she made the decision that home caregiving would be too hard and had her mother transferred to a hospital near their home. “Why are you leaving me in a place like this?” her mother asked angrily. Even after Morizumi explained the situation, her mother just kept on saying, “After everything I did for you....” For more than a year, Morizumi went to the hospital once every morning and once every afternoon to look after her mother, but her mother stayed just as angry. Morizumi still remembers something passed on by a friend of her mother’s when Morizumi was seeing her off after a visit to the hospital. “Obatsuteyama still exists,”¹³ her mother had apparently said to the friend, a comment full of resentment toward her daughter.

I interviewed Morizumi at her home, a few months after her mother had died. In the living room was a Buddhist altar with a photograph of her parents. Morizumi placed the fruit I had brought as a gift on the altar and introduced me. The interview took place in the living room. When telling me the story of about the Obatsuteyama comment, Morizumi stopped for a moment and looked up at the photograph of her mother. As the silence grew longer, I interjected, saying, “Still, she must think you were a good daughter.” Morizumi responded, “I think so too—with a 51 percent probability.” She looked toward her mother’s photo and muttered, “Right, mom? I did my best.”

¹³ A reference to the mountain where old people are taken and abandoned in Japanese folktales.

For children, the death of a parent is not the end of the caregiving process. This applies all the more when parents do not say “thank you” before departing. If Morizumi’s mother had thanked her or said, “you’ve been a good daughter” to her before dying, Morizumi’s sense of guilt would have been significantly lessened. Many of the former parental caregivers I interviewed told me repeatedly how their parent had thanked them before passing on. They interpreted this as appreciation for the work they had done.

A child caring for a parent, particularly a daughter caring for her mother, is often cited as the most desirable kind of caregiving relationship because they are both of the same gender and because it symbolizes the emotional relationships of the modern family. But at Musume Salon, there were more than a few cases like that of Morizumi—of mother-daughter relationships having gone pear-shaped in the course of caregiving. It appeared that the distortion of this relationship in caregiving situations was due to daughters’ sense of a lack of maternal instinct on the part of their mothers and to mothers’ use of this as a mechanism for controlling their daughters. But it was hard to essentialize this interpretation as a general characteristic of mother-daughter relationships because there are no cases of such conflict being cited in maternal caregiving by war widows. On the contrary, intergenerational conflict generally occurred between mothers- and daughters-in-law, with sons caught in the middle. Dependence- and control-based mother-daughter conflict is a new post-war phenomenon that has emerged against a background of maternal instinct and heightened status for daughters in the modern family.

Talk of care recipients as passive and powerless was rare among mothers in the stories of daughters at Musume Salon. Mothers in these stories were master strategists, adept at using their children’s own senses of guilt to entrap them. Being able to complain about, badmouth, and criticize mothers like this was one of the main reasons that their daughters went to the salon. Their common stance as daughters looking after parents let them expect that nothing they might say there would be improper; this prompted them to speak without restraint. The ability to laugh in empathy when you hear somebody say, “At that moment, I really wanted to punch [my mother]” comes from experiencing the same pain.

But the bonds and empathy among daughters caring for parents, based on their common narrative of being daughters, was inevitably limited. It used the shared standpoint of daughterhood to temporarily stitch over the

various conflicts that arose in parental caregiving. In particular, the differences between unmarried and married women inevitably burst into the open when it came to choosing between working or looking after parents; this created cracks in the shared narrative of being tormented daughters.

2) Work or Caregiving? The Dilemma Dividing Daughters

Among those attending Musume Salon, married women came to get information or interact, while unmarried women often came for life counseling. In particular unmarried women in their 30s and 40s sometimes came in despair to ask for advice when faced with the task of caring for their parents and agonizing about how to balance it with their work and their future. The constant influx of such life counseling-type seekers made discussions of the choice between work and parental care unavoidable, leading ultimately to clashes of opinion. On one occasion, the fuse was lit by the dilemma of Sakurai, an unmarried woman.

Case 6: Sakurai, Mid-30s, Unmarried Woman, One Older Sister, No Brothers

My mother is 72 this year. Five years ago, she was diagnosed with a cerebral infarction. She has needed care for one year. My father is her primary caregiver. My older sister is married and lives far away, and I have moved out of my parents' home in Tokyo and work in Saitama. My workplace is two hours away from my parents' home.... Until now, my father has borne the burden of caregiving by himself. But recently, the situation has changed, and we can't leave him to do it all by himself any more.... I'm wondering whether I should quit my job. I want to get married, and I need to work, but I can't just ignore caregiving. I don't know how to plan my life, so I'm in a dilemma.

Normally, when unmarried participants mentioned such problems of choice, the married counterparts gave cordial responses along the lines of, "They're your parents, so make a choice you won't regret later." But today, Kawahara, a first-time participant who was married and in her mid-40s, took a more active stance. When she had been in a similar situation, she said, she had chosen to quit her job and provide care, and she thought that had been a good choice.

Case 7: Kawahara, Mid-40s, Married Woman

My mother had always lived on her own, but three years ago she was

hospitalized for four months. When she was discharged, she was no longer fit to live by herself. She was 72 at the time, and I was a full-time company employee, living with my husband. It didn't seem right to just send mother to an institution; she was still young.... After talking about it with my husband, we decided to live with her. But it wasn't just a question of bringing her to our house to live with us. She kept saying she wanted to die, so the doctor ordered us not to take our eyes off her. In the end, I quit my job and dedicated myself to caregiving. Perhaps because of this, her care requirement level decreased from three to two.

Kawahara stressed that choosing care over work when the two came into conflict had been the right thing to do. Emphasizing that devoted care was good care, she even cited numbers to illustrate her success. This was the narrative of someone who had behaved in the best way possible in terms of emphasized femininity. The influence of this type of femininity, which places maternal instinct and caregiving before all else, internalizes the norm that choosing caregiving over work when forced into a choice is superior, whichever option is actually chosen. This is what lets emphasized femininity remain influential, instilling a sense of guilt in working mothers for not being good carers, despite the ever-growing number of women who get full-time jobs after giving birth.

But that day, an unmarried participant who, like Kawahara, was attending the meeting for the first time, disputed the latter's narrative, saying that from her point of view, as someone with no breadwinner to support her, it was hard to recognize caring for parents as an absolutely superior choice.

Case 8: Musume Salon Participant, 52, Unmarried Woman

I came here via another family association. Most associations have a lot of women who look after their husbands. Their way of thinking is totally different to mine.... When my mother passes away, I'll have to work. So, I have no choice but to consider more efficient ways of caregiving. I came to Musume Salon because I wanted to talk about things like that.

This was the first person to draw such a definite line between married and unmarried statuses and to question the ideal of self-sacrificial caregiving. The atmosphere grew chilly at this unexpected challenge. Sakurai, who had been the first to speak, tried to settle things by making a signal to wrap up the conversation. Someone else responded with typical words of encouragement offered to caregivers, saying, "Anyway, your parents are precious, so make a choice you won't regret." At this point,

Mizuno, who was caring for her father, a dementia patient who lived apart from her, interjected, picking up on the word “regret.”

Case 9: Mizuno, 47, Unmarried Woman, No Sisters, One Brother

Whatever choice you make, you’ll be left with regrets. My friend’s father died a few days ago. He had a cerebral infarction and was diagnosed with cancer, and my friend cared for him for four months. She kept living in her own home and went back and forth to his place to look after him, and when he died [sooner than expected], she said she regretted not staying closer to him while she cared for him, saying she would have done so if only she had known what was going to happen. When I heard that, I thought I should stop working for the time being and move in with my father in order to look after him—in order not to end up with that kind of regret. But on the other hand, some people warn me that I should look after my own life, or I’ll regret it later. I think about the balance between caring for parents and protecting my own life. What’s a good ratio? No matter how you think about it, your parents can’t be zero. And neither can I. So, I’m still wondering what ratio to settle on.

Being unable to make a choice when required to do so had placed Mizuno in a dilemma. Unmarried women experiencing conflict regarding parental care are often given advice based on the notion that since they are unmarried and do not take care of anyone, and have lived only for themselves until now, surely they should prioritize the parents who raised them over their own work, as long as they have the means to support themselves for the time being. But when offered such advice, unmarried women like Mizuno cite the “impossibility of choosing,” unable to make a choice between their parents, their work, and their own lives.

The interchange above was the moment that most clearly revealed the different stances between unmarried and married women at Musume Salon. Yet the moderator intervened and cut the conversation short. But the conflict was reignited later that day at an appraisal session held by the management team. The issue was raised by Suzuki, a volunteer who had worked for 30 years as a secretary while caring for both her parents. Mentioning Kawahara’s comments, Suzuki expressed regret.

Case 10: Suzuki, 64, Unmarried Woman, One Younger Sister, Two Brothers

Telling someone who’s trying to decide between caring for her parents and working how you quit a full-time company job to look after your mother—isn’t that something you can only do when you have a husband who brings home a salary every month? I think if someone giving care while working in a full-time job, or looking for one, heard what Kawahara said, they’d think,

“Yeah, because you’ve got someone to earn money for you.”

Suzuki then took aim at the moderator, saying that somebody needed to restore balance to the lopsided discussion, and it was a shame she seemed to have missed the chance to intervene at the right time. On that day, Morikawa, the moderator, abandoned her habitual mild manner and came back at Suzuki in a sharp tone.

Case 11: Morikawa, 52, Married Woman, No Sisters, One Brother

Surely it’s clear that just because it’s that person [Kawahara] doesn’t mean she leads a comfortable life. She even mentioned that her husband suffered from depression. It’s hard to conclude that she said what she did just because her husband is the breadwinner. She must have had difficulties, and if her decision was based on them, I don’t think you can call it biased.

Most of the management team at Musume Salon were married women. By contrast, Suzuki and the other volunteer who had raised these issues were both unmarried women with experience caring for parents. It was then that a normally hidden line of conflict regarding the management of the group burst into relief. On the way home that day, Suzuki took me to a bar and revealed her pent-up frustration with Musume Salon. Repeatedly, she urged me to use my position as a researcher to tell unmarried women facing the difficult choice between work and parental caregiving “that they must never quit their jobs.”

Case 12: Suzuki, 64, Unmarried Woman

A married woman with kids, like Morikawa, can’t understand the position of single women. For single women caring for their parents, the biggest problem is their future. I want to tell them that this is what they must regard as most important. For their future, they have to secure a pension that no one can take away from them. If they want that, they simply can’t quit their job. If they quit, they’re finished. When a single person gives care, their siblings thank them and say they feel bad, but when the parents die, that’s it.

Suzuki was claiming that anyone facing a choice between caring for parents and working should unhesitatingly choose work. This desperate advice was based on her own experience. But in my view, the unmarried women at Musume Salon were experiencing conflict because they found it hard to think of caring for parents and working as a question of choice. They were born at a time of economic growth and received both material and emotional support from their parents, so for many of them, the

relationship with the latter was a key intimacy sphere. Because of this, it was hard for them to accept either side with certainty, be it pressure to prioritize caring for their parents, like “women,” or advice to hold on to their jobs at all costs.

Compared to the past—when “normal” life for a woman meant getting married while still at a suitable age, becoming a housewife, and giving birth to two children—Japanese women today live more diverse lives with more choices. But when you look at those choices, that of an unmarried working life does not initially assume childrearing or caregiving. The lives of married women include various ways of combining childrearing and career; but for unmarried women, a career is the only choice.

Shimazaki Naoko (2013) points out that the discourse about increasingly diverse life courses since the 1990s is confined to the realm of individual lifestyle, and there has merely been an increase in choices on the periphery; the core life model of a salaryman married to a full-time housewife has been left intact. In other words, while women have gained the ability to choose a variety of lives other than that of full-time housewife, the fact that these diverse other choices have not been institutionalized as life courses means that plugging the gap between institutions and reality depends entirely on individual effort.

When faced with the task of caring for parents, unmarried women draw upon all of their personal resources to combine work with caregiving or, if that doesn't work, reach a point where they give up their career for the sake of caregiving. In a society without institutional support or compensation for family caregivers, giving up a career to care for parents marginalizes unmarried women and relegates them to a lower social class. When seen in the above context, the lives of unmarried women who care for their parents are hard to subsume and hard to understand in terms of the life courses of other “women.” This is why the combination of unmarried women and caregiving is moving in a direction that calls for reform of gender order itself.

3) *Obitori-sama: Redefining Singlehood*

The basic stance of the Aladdin management team was that the pain of daughters was due to a loophole in a system that turned a blind eye to the burdens of family. They therefore did not feel much of a need to respond to the differences between married and unmarried women that emerged

during meetings. In the end, it was the participants themselves who found a solution: a group led by unmarried women declared its intention to start a new gathering. In November 2013, the Carer's Café began hosting "Ohitori-sama Meeting of Working Carers." The meeting's subtitle was "I want to work, care, and date." Here, the unmarried women were asserting the characteristic whereby they would combine the tasks forced upon them in parallel and could not choose or prioritize any single one in isolation. They were responding to the pressure placed on them by declaring that unmarried people give care, work, and date—all at the same time.¹⁴

The first meeting was moderated by Waki, who had changed jobs and companies several times due to being a parental caregiver. It was attended by three unmarried women and one married woman from Musume Salon, plus one unmarried man who supported their aims. Waki described the mood at that first meeting as follows.

Case 13: Waki's Account of the First Ohitori-sama Meeting

If we don't send a message, we can't move forward. Let's make some noise and send a message. They might think we're noisy people, but let's talk anyway. People say, "You're not married, so it's okay for you to care for your parents"; "It must be good to be young and energetic." If we don't say how angry comments like this make us, people won't know. If we want to change the world, we need to speak up for ourselves. Let's start by coming out at our workplaces and to those around us and saying: "This is how we are."

The first meeting thus produced a mutual understanding among the participants regarding "coming out." Working caregivers try not to reveal to colleagues that they are caregivers. In Japan's corporate culture, which demands corporate warriors ready to fight 24 hours a day, disclosing caregiving responsibilities risks revealing a weakness and incurring disadvantage. Many caregivers choose to combine work and caregiving, then quietly vanish from the workplace if they reach a point when this is no longer possible. But this choice results in rendering caregivers invisible and reinforcing the image of normality of other colleagues who are avoiding responsibility for caregiving in their own families. The Ohitori-sama Meeting calls for "coming out, making ourselves known, and changing the world," in order to overcome this situation.

¹⁴ The first gathering of Ohitori-sama Meeting of Working Carers was held after I had finished my field study and returned to South Korea. My information about the meeting's initial and subsequent progress was gathered through indirect channels.

Right after the first Ohitori-sama Meeting, the Abe government began discussing the workforce reduction due to elder caregiving as a social problem. Boosted by this mood, the group's second meeting was an unexpected success. At a time when social interest in leaving work to give care was increasing, a meeting created by unmarried caregivers themselves proved very timely and became a talking point. These reverberations continued into subsequent meetings.

Though the dictionary defines *ohitori-sama* as "one person," unmarried caregivers gave it a new meaning: somebody giving care by themselves, without a partner; a "single caregiver." It is interesting that unmarried women made active use of their damaged identities in the process of taking over *ohitori-sama* and using it to mean "working caregivers." This condensed way of conveying their status as caregivers forced to work and give care alone made active use of their unmarried circumstances, with no husband to support them. But such attempts to shake up the meaning of singlehood from the inside, by connecting work and caregiving, just like resistance among women in white-collar jobs (Painter 1996; Ogasawara 1998), does not lead to rectification of inequality and may actually lead to reproduction of the existing structure. In fact, it cannot be overlooked that the positive response to calls from unmarried caregivers for the world to change—so that they can both work and give care—is ultimately happening because it coincides with new state policies emphasizing that caregiving is indeed the responsibility of the family. Speaking up from the position of a family caregiver risks convergence with discourses that see family responsibility for caregiving as self-evident.

But despite its limits, *ohitori-sama* caregiving remains noteworthy for the way it approaches the caregiving issue from a different angle to that of conventional family caregiving. Firstly, *ohitori-sama* caregiving is new in terms of concept, defining family caregivers in terms of themselves rather than in terms of the properties of their relationship with the care recipient. Other caregiver gatherings gave themselves names such as "family meeting," "sons' meeting" and "daughters' meeting." By contrast, *ohitori-sama* indicates individuals who must work and give care by themselves. The group's efforts therefore stand out for providing a new perspective that can integrate lives subdivided in terms of gender and marital status. Conventional perspectives classifying the lives of women began from the premise that a choice could be made between work or caregiving, or between work and family. This is based on the premise that a woman has a husband to depend on. Once this

characteristic of singlehood, where this choice is not possible to start with, is expanded to become a characteristic of individuals in general, it opens the possibility of attempting a lifestyle integrating work and caregiving, irrespective of gender or marital status. It allows protest over the way women's lives, unlike men's lives, are subdivided and involve difficult choices from the start, highlighting the strangeness of this phenomenon. Institutionalizing life courses, starting from the perception of adults as individuals who must all both work and give care, may be a more efficient and effective approach to producing gender-integrative lives than plugging the gap in a situation premised on gender-based role divisions. In this sense, *obitori-sama* may be universally labeled as "individuals looking after other people," and singlehood may be understood as a life and a caregiving relationship not premised on gender-based division of labor.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined competing popular opinions that emerge in connection with the division of parental caregiving responsibilities among siblings in Japan, an aging society with increasing numbers of unmarried people. In terms of evolving family caregiving norms, the discussion so far can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, since the year 2000, the number of daughters-in-law acting as primary caregivers (a quasi-institutionalized family role historically imposed upon them) has steadily declined, while there has been a steady rise in the normalization of parental caregiving by adult children. Secondly, it is hard to take the view that gender norms are irreversibly weakening when it comes to caring for the elderly. The recent statistical increase in male caregivers can be interpreted more as an adaptation due to lack of alternatives than as a result of weakened gender-based role divisions that assign care roles to women before men. Thirdly, there is conflict between married and unmarried women about the distribution of parental care duties. This is a latent rift that does not show on the surface, apparently due to the effects of a dual family caregiving structure: married women look after families, unmarried women look after parents.

While legal and institutional singlehood in the West has been accompanied by increases in de facto marriage, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock births, the growth in numbers of unmarried people in Japan has not been

accompanied by sexual revolution. Rather, it has driven up the number of people living with or caring for their parents. At first glance, it sometimes appears that unmarried people have been incorporated into existing familism and gender orders. But a closer look shows that increasingly difficult lives, particularly in the case of unmarried daughters, are producing cracks in gender categories that have been controlling them. Turning unmarried women into family caregivers has pressured them into self-awareness as unmarried individuals and is creating a movement towards the politicization of singlehood. The case of the Ohitori-sama Meeting is a good example of this. The equal social participation demanded by *ohitori-sama*, combining singlehood and caregiving, transcends the familist system; in this sense, it harbors potential to become the starting point for a revolution in family relationships and gender order.

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