

The “Myth of the First Three Years” and the Ideology of Motherhood in Japan

by

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Bachelor of Commerce, Nihon University, Japan, 2020

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Pacific and Asian Studies

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University of Victoria

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Abstract

The “Myth of the First Three Years” (*sansaiji shinwa*, 三歳児神話) refers to a common belief among Japanese that mothers should stay with their children until they turn three years old to ensure children’s proper development. The widespread myth of mother-child bonding has played a crucial part in normalizing mothers’ child-rearing roles and creating social prejudice against working mothers in postwar Japan. This thesis deconstructs the “Myth of the First Three Years” by exploring its origin and structural and ideological dimensions. The history of the construction of motherhood in modern Japan reveals that the myth was not originated from centuries-old traditions, but derived from intersecting gendered practices in the postwar years, as evidenced by the dominant cultural discourse of full-time housewives (*senkyō shufu*, 専業主婦) and the popularity of child-rearing theories in the 1960s. The myth contributed to the popularization of the gendered idea that women were “naturally” mothers and primary caregivers for their children, as encapsulated in the notion of motherhood. Using feminist critiques of gender norms and Roland Barthes’ (1972) theory of myth-making, this thesis dissects the historical and cultural construction of motherhood as a women’s innate ability and discusses how the “Myth of the First Three Years” popularized the ideology of motherhood by normalizing the gender division of child-rearing labour in postwar Japan. My research also includes interviews with four working mothers in Japan. The experiences of each mother reveal the lingering impact of the myth on the gender division of labour in the workplace and at home from the 1980s to present-day Japan. This thesis concludes that the “Myth of the First Three Years” has served to naturalize women’s roles as primary caregivers for their children while sustaining the gender division of labour.

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List of Abbreviations

MEXT	The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology
MHLW	The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare
MHW	The Ministry of Health and Welfare
MLIT	The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism
NHK	<i>Nippon Hoso Kyokai</i> (Japan Broadcasting Corporation)

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Sujin Lee, and a committee member, Dr. Angie Chau, who were wonderfully supportive on my whole process of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Richard Fox, who first recommended that I read Roland Barthes' book about myth to explore my main interest, the "Myth of the First Three Years." This book gave my research unique and significant perspectives to dissect the myth.

In addition, I would like to thank Nancy Ami from the Centre of Academic Communication, who has given me feedback and comments on my writing every single week since I was a first-year master's student. Her positive and cheerful feedback has always motivated and encouraged me to keep writing. I would also like to express my gratitude to my best friend, Carolyn Horner, who always helps me with my English. She always supports me with a positive attitude on everything in my life, which has meant a lot to me in this academic journey.

Finally, I want to give my biggest love and hugs to my daughter, Sumi. All of my passion for this research came from my life experiences with her. She is also a great Special Helper for me both physically and emotionally. Without her daily support and beautiful smile, I could never have completed this thesis.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction and overview

One morning on the subway in Sapporo, I was heading to daycare, holding my four-month-old baby in my arms. It was just my everyday routine as a full-time working mother. One elderly woman looked at us and said, “Oh my, daycare at such a young age? Poor little baby.” I felt sorry for my baby and guilty about going to work. But I had no choice. I did not blame this woman. I knew she only said that because of her belief in common parenting practices in Japan.

One of the most widespread beliefs about parenting in Japan is called the “Myth of the First Three Years” (*sansaiji shinwa*, 三歳児神話). This myth presents the following belief: Mothers should stay with their children all the time, at least until they turn three years old, for their proper development (Ōhinata, 2001; Shoji et al., 1998; Takayama, 2002; Uchida, 2010). Namely, this belief suggests that leaving children at daycare or elsewhere before the age of three will interfere with their proper development because a mother-child relationship is essential in the first three years of life.

This myth impacts people’s beliefs in parenting practices significantly in contemporary Japan. This belief, emphasizing a mother-child relationship in early childhood, causes working mothers to be criticized. Some people believe that children left at daycare from

an early age become mentally unstable (Hosoda, 2019). Others blame working mothers for leaving their children at daycare, which they equate with child neglect (Kawai, 2021). Therefore, many working mothers with young children face the dilemma of whether to quit their jobs and stay with their children full-time or continue their careers to support their children financially. In this way, even though it has no basis in fact, the belief that mothers should stay with their young children places mothers in the position of the primary responsibility of parenting and causes debilitating stress for working mothers. The elderly woman's concern for my baby was most likely based on this widespread belief in parenting.

However, as the name “Myth of the First Three Years” suggests, the Japanese public already know this belief in child-rearing is a myth. According to a Japanese dictionary, a myth (*shinwa*, 神話) is a story that is believed to be absolute, even though it is unfounded (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition, 2008). Thus, to call this belief a “myth” indicates that the parenting practice that the belief supports has no basis. This fact then leads us to question how the parenting practice was assumed to be unfounded and why the myth is so influential to the Japanese public's belief despite its shaky evidence.

Moreover, even though this myth continues to affect mothers in Japan today, the Japanese government officially denied the validity of this myth in 1998. In *Kōsei Hakusho* (厚生白書, White Paper on Health and Welfare), the Ministry of Health and Welfare (hereinafter referred to as MHW) in Japan (1998) advised against belief in the myth, which had placed

parental responsibility solely on mothers. Namely, the government tried to release mothers from the burden of the primary responsibility of parenting. However, as mentioned above, the influence of the myth has not diminished significantly. Instead, the myth still impacts people's gendered beliefs about parenting in contemporary Japan, despite the government's official debunking of the myth over two decades ago.

Although the “Myth of the First Three Years” is deeply rooted in Japanese society, how and when this belief came into being remains under investigation. There are various opinions about the origin of this myth among Japanese scholars in psychology and early childhood education. One of the dominant hypotheses is that the myth originated from British psychologist John Bowlby's (1951) theory on developmental psychology. His attachment theory emphasizes the importance of stable and continuous relationships with one parent in early childhood. Another hypothesis concerns a Japanese proverb, “*mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made*” (三つ子の魂百まで). This old saying, translated as the soul of a three-year-old child lasts until they are one hundred years old, indicates one's nature will not change in their lifetime and highlights the belief that early childhood life determines the course of the rest of the child's life (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition, 2008). However, there is no consensus among experts on the exact origin of the “Myth of the First Three Years.” In other words, along with the question of how it came to be called a myth, no scholar has yet identified the direct origin of the myth.

While all of these hypotheses examine the myth from the perspective of child development, this myth in fact dictates how mothers should behave. This myth, which appears to be about children's health and early childhood education, conveys a gender norm that designates women's primary role in child-rearing and thus normalizes Japanese mother-centred parenting. Current research on this myth has not fully explored such an ideological aspect underlying the myth. In order to unearth the gender assumptions embedded in the myth, this thesis examines the nexus between the myth around child development and the gender norm that permeates contemporary Japan.

To explore the ideological dimensions and impacts of the myth, I will dissect each concept, "motherhood" and "myth," that constitutes this myth. First, I will explore the term motherhood by examining the cultural and structural factors that form gender norms. While people often think motherhood is a woman's innate ability to raise a child, feminist scholars have refuted this idea. Instead, feminist scholars argue that motherhood is a historically variable, socially constructed ideology under the current gender belief system (Arendell, 2000; Hays, 1996). This idea will contribute to analyzing the ideological dimension and social construction of the "Myth of the First Three Years." By adopting the feminist critique about the construction of motherhood, I will investigate the development of the Japanese ideology of motherhood by tracing the history of gender norms and social situations from before the Meiji period (1868-1912) to present-day Japan. By adopting the feminist critique about the construction of

motherhood, I will investigate the development of the Japanese ideology of motherhood by tracing the history of gender norms from before the Meiji period (1868-1912) to present-day Japan.

In addition, I will employ Roland Barthes' (1972) concept from his book, *Mythologies*, and apply his myth-making theory to examine the "Myth of the First Three Years." Barthes (1972) introduces the critical relationship between myth and ideologies. His concept of the myth-making mechanism explains how myth functions to legitimize and popularize ideologies, thus taking them for granted in society. This notion of myth will help uncover the core function and the ideological aspect of the "Myth of the First Three Years" in this thesis. In so doing, I will clarify how myth and motherhood intersect and function to normalize gender norms of women's primary responsibility of child-rearing in contemporary Japan.

In summary, this thesis will examine the "Myth of the First Three Years" by articulating its social construction and ideological dimensions to determine its impacts on the formation of the gender division of child-rearing labour in Japan. As a result, this thesis will reveal what kind of cultural discourse and institutional structures have been mobilized to popularize the mother-centred parenting practices that underlie the "Myth of the First Three Years." In addition, the myth-making mechanism will identify the lingering effects of this myth, which was debunked over twenty years ago, on the normalization of women's primary role as caregivers, while hindering gender-equal parenting in contemporary Japan.

1.2 Research questions

This thesis addresses three questions regarding the “Myth of the First Three Years.” The first question is, “When and how did the ‘Myth of the First Three Years’ emerge?” I aim to address this question by examining the origin of the child-rearing practice based on this myth and the reason that the practice is regarded as a “myth.” Also, my question about the origin of the myth includes the reason for the normative idea around the importance of the first three years for a child’s development. In order to explore the answers to my first questions, I pay attention to the social construction of the myth, including the dominant cultural discourse of full-time housewives (*sengyō shufu*, 専業主婦) after the 1960s, in addition to the hypotheses that other scholars have already posited.

The next question is, “Why does this myth, which appears to be about a child’s development, convey the ideal concept of motherhood?” While this myth highlights a parenting method for proper child development, it traps mothers in a particular child-rearing belief and imposes a gender norm in parenting. I aim to reveal the myth’s ideological dimensions by using the framework of motherhood and myth. Finding the answer to this question also reveals how the myth has normalized the gender division of child-rearing labour.

The final question of this thesis is, “Why does this myth still have a significant impact on Japanese people’s beliefs in parenting practices, despite the Japanese government’s official denial of the myth over twenty years ago?” This examination focuses on how the “Myth of the

First Three Years” has normalized Japanese women’s primary role as caregivers while simultaneously excluding fathers from the main responsibility in parenting. Ultimately, this question reveals that the lingering impacts of the gender norms underlying the myth hinder the development of gender-equal parenting in contemporary Japan.

1.3 Chapter outline

To align with the central research questions, this thesis is structured into six chapters. First, Chapter 1 articulates the overview, research questions, and chapter outlines of this thesis.

Chapter 2 explores existing literature about the “Myth of the First Three Years.” The examination includes the dominant hypotheses about this myth’s origin from the perspectives of psychology and early childhood education and the cultural aspect of an old Japanese proverb. Moreover, this chapter explores the feminist critiques and the myth-making mechanism to dissect each term, “motherhood” and “myth.” Ultimately, this chapter introduces a theoretical framework that reveals the construction, the function, and the structural impact of the myth in later chapters.

Chapter 3 traces the development of the Japanese ideology of motherhood, which is underlying the gender norms that the “Myth of the First Three Years” dictates. In particular, this chapter pays attention to the popularization of Japanese full-time wives, “*sengyō shufu*” (専業主婦), which was the role common to women during Japan’s rapid economic growth.

This chapter also explores the popularization of one child-rearing theory, which emphasizes a mother-child bond and the importance of early child life, after the 1960s. I will investigate how this child-rearing theory was related to full-time housewives' parenting practices and the Japanese ideology of motherhood.

Chapter 4 examines the Japanese ideology of motherhood after the late 1980s onwards.

This chapter focuses on the Japanese government's new policies promoting gender-equal parenting triggered by the demographic crisis in 1989. The promotions of gender-equal parenting include the government's official denial of the "Myth of the First Three Years" in 1998 to release mothers from their burden of sole parenting responsibility and the *Ikumen* Project in 2010 to promote men's active participation in child-rearing. To identify the results of the government's series of new policies and promotions, I analyze data about Japan's national fertility rate, childcare leave acquisition rate, and a national survey on people's awareness about child-rearing. Finally, using the framework of motherhood and myth-making, I reveal how the ideology of motherhood underlying the myth prevents realizing gender-equal parenting in Japan.

Chapter 5 shares the results of interviews with four Japanese working mothers from two generations who had children before and after the 2010s. The interviews include questions about how much the "Myth of the First Three Years" has impacted their parenting experiences and their careers. The mothers' responses demonstrate how the myth continues to affect

people's beliefs about parenting and the gender division of labour at home and in the workplace.

Finally, Chapter 6 highlights the research results of this thesis by summarizing each finding. In addition, this chapter acknowledges the research limitations of this thesis due to the COVID-19 pandemic and presents recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore in depth the “Myth of the First Three Years” and its impact on the gendered parenting culture in Japan. Japanese people commonly believe that mothers should always stay at home to take care of children when their children are still young, especially until they turn three. This belief, based on the “Myth of the First Three Years,” leads to mother-centred parenting practices in Japan and a gendered division of care labour. In this chapter, I explore how this myth came into existence and how it has impacted people’s beliefs in child-rearing.

First, I examine the existing studies on the “Myth of the First Three Years” to understand how and when this myth emerged and what has been discussed by scholars so far. In particular, I will illuminate the historical process of the popularization of the myth and its lingering impact on the pattern of household labour and work culture in contemporary Japan. Next, I will dissect the main assumptions underlying this myth, focusing on the notions of motherhood and myth. Exploring each term will contribute to understanding the central premise of the “Myth of the First Three Years.” Finally, I will propose a theoretical framework by employing feminists’ approaches to the concept of motherhood and Roland Barthes’ (1972) analysis of the mechanism of myth-making. This theoretical framework will help critically evaluate the historical and social context of the popularization of the myth and its effects in reinforcing gender norms, as discussed in later chapters.

2.1 The existing studies about the “Myth of the First Three Years”

Japanese experts in psychology and early childhood education describe the “Myth of the First Three Years” as a prevailing belief among Japanese people about normative child-rearing practices. This myth conveys that mothers should stay with their children full-time, at least until the children turn the age of three. According to existing studies, the Japanese public commonly believe that children who do not have enough time spent with their mothers during this crucial period do not form a proper mother-child bond, and the lack of the bond causes children’s aggressive behaviour and/or mental disorders (Kayama, 2010; Ōhinata, 2001; Shoji et al., 1998; Takayama, 2002; Uchida, 2010). In light of this, the myth serves to justify the importance of mothers’ caregiving roles in the early years of a child’s life to ensure the child’s proper development.

This prevailing motherhood myth focused on mothers’ roles strongly has affected mothers in contemporary Japan. Ōhinata (2001), a renowned Japanese developmental psychologist, points out three tenets that underlie the myth: First, early childhood, especially from birth to the age of three, is a crucial period for child development. Second, in this period, the principal agents of childcare must be biological mothers because they possess true maternal love, which is essential in adequate childcare. The third tenet states that mothers’ careers cause a lack of proper childcare, and hence, affect their children’s development negatively. In short, this tripartite belief expects mothers to devote themselves to early childhood care as stay-at-

home mothers. Ultimately, this motherhood myth poses challenges for mothers who want or need to work before their children turn three years old.

This myth is said to stem from several theories related to developmental psychology. In particular, Uchida (2010) points to the hospitalism theory by pediatrician R.A. Spitz and the attachment theory by psychiatrist John Bowlby as the predominant origins of the myth. According to Uchida (2010), Spitz's hospitalism theory hypothesizes that growing up in orphanages negatively affects a child's development or leads to abnormal behaviour due to insufficient love from a mother. Similarly, Bowlby's attachment theory explains that stable and continuous relationships with one parent (specifically a mother) build children's emotional stability (Uchida, 2010). Takayama (2002) explicitly mentions John Bowlby's (1951) book, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, as one of the primary triggers in the popularization of this myth in Japan. In this book, Bowlby (1951) emphasizes the necessity of a mother-child relationship and explains that children's lack of this relationship is termed "maternal deprivation" (p. 11). Uchida (2010) argues that these two theories by Spitz and Bowlby were combined and created the following belief: an interruption to the continuous relationship between mother and child, even if it is temporary, disturbs the child's proper development and leads to a severe impact on mental health. This belief posits a strong mother-child bond as one of the most crucial elements for early childhood life, and this idea is manifested in the general public's understanding about the "Myth of the First Three Years."

In addition to the theories in developmental psychology put forth by Spitz and Bowlby, other scientific fields also explain the importance of an early child's life. Shoji et al. (1998) suggest that neurophysiology, ethology, and neonatology, which maintain that the brain and nervous system are almost entirely formed in infancy, constituted the basis of the myth. Although these studies do not mention the importance of a mother-child relationship, one can assume that these studies have contributed to people's awareness of the importance of early childhood care and have strengthened the myth's persuasiveness. Overall, in most cases, existing studies on the "Myth of the First Three Years" pay attention to these scientific observations based on early childhood development as the possible origins of the myth.

While the theories of developmental psychology and other scientific spheres consistently emphasize the importance of early childhood, few of them have mentioned the first three years as a critical period. My examination extends to other aspects to see why this myth focuses specifically on this particular period of a child's life. Some scholars point to a possible relationship between this myth and a Japanese proverb called "*mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made* (三つ子の魂百まで)" (Ōhinata, 2015; Ozawa, 1989; Shoji et al., 1998). This proverb, translated as "the soul of a three-year-old child lasts until one hundred years old," indicates one's nature will not change in their lifetime (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition). As Nakura (2001) confirms, it already appeared in an 1813's article by Shikitei Samba, *Ukiyo Buro* (浮世風呂). Japanese people have often used this old proverb to describe the

importance of education and discipline in one's early childhood. Although this proverb does not precisely match what the "Myth of the First Three Years" refers to in that it does not mention the importance of a mother-child relationship, it has played a crucial role in raising people's awareness about the first three years as a critical period of life. Thus, later chapters of this thesis examine the relationship between this proverb and the origin, proliferation, or naming of the myth.

Another possible hypothesis of the origin of the myth, which focuses on the three years of age, concerns sociocultural aspects. For example, in the 1960s, MHW started the municipal health examination for three-year-old children as one of the *hitozukuri* (human resource development) policies (Ozawa, 1989). In addition, the educational child-rearing TV program entitled "Three-Year-Old Children" (三歳児, *sansaiji*), broadcast from 1964 to 1965, had significant viewership and was published in a magazine format with the same title in 1966 (Ozawa, 1989). Subsequently, several parenting books were published to popularize the importance of early education before the age of three in the 1970s. For instance, Ibuka (1971), a founder of Sony Education Foundation and the author of several child-rearing books, repeatedly asserts the importance of early childhood education and care before the age of three in his book, *Kindergarten is Too Late* (幼稚園からでは遅すぎる). These observations indicate that, in the 1960s and the 1970s, there was already increasing public and media attention to the first three years of a child's life as the most critical period for one's development.

From the investigations so far, none of the theories or events determined the exact origin of the “Myth of the First Three Years.” While scientific theories emphasize the importance of early childhood life, none of them identifies the age of three as a critical period. Rather, this chapter found that cultural and social aspects such as a Japanese proverb, media, and the government’s health examination for children emphasized the three-year-old. Therefore, identifying the origin of the “Myth of the First Three Years” requires exploring the intersection of these multiple directions.

In the meantime, there has been no consensus among researchers about when the myth gained traction in Japan. *Kōsei Hakusho* (厚生白書, White Paper on Health and Welfare) mentions that this myth was popularized in the 1960s (The Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1998). Uchida (2010) suggests that the myth became popular in the 1970s around the period of Japan’s rapid economic growth. Shoji et al. (1998) state that this myth unlikely emerged long ago. Similarly, Takayama (2002) describes that this myth has a relatively short history and only suggests a possibility of the late 1980s from Ozawa’s (1989) paper that uses the similar word “Three Years Old Myth (*sansai-shinwa*)” (p. 160). In short, none of these authors has identified the exact time of the emergence of the myth. Thus, Chapter 3 examines social conditions related to the popularization of a common belief in parenting after the 1960s to determine as precisely as possible when the “Myth of the First Three Years” emerged. The time period in which the myth gained traction will illuminate the social embeddedness and gendered connotations of the

myth.

While this myth has been widely trusted and has had a strong impact on Japanese parenting, the validity of the two key points, an uninterrupted mother-child bond and the first three years, were controversial among specialists. For example, in their cognitive function research for 130 families with children from one to seven years old, A.E. Gottfried and A.W. Gottfried (1988) found no significant differences in the development process between children whose mothers work outside the home and those whose mothers do not. In short, their study found no negative impact of mothers' careers on their children's development. Rather, these authors observe the quality of the domestic environment and parents' socioeconomic status is more influential in children's psychological balance than the length of time they spend with their mothers. Likewise, Amino (2003), a Japanese child welfare scholar who has conducted research on infant care for a long time, indicates that leaving a child in daycare before the age of one does not negatively affect both intellectual and physical development. Instead, the author emphasizes that the quality of care, namely how caretakers treat children, is the most important factor for child development. Thus, despite the popularity of the myth even today, experts since the late 1980s have already challenged the necessity of the consistent mother-child bond before three years old.

Moreover, the Japanese government officially denied this myth's validity. According to the *Kōsei Hakusho* published in 1998, MHW refuted the widespread belief of the "Myth of

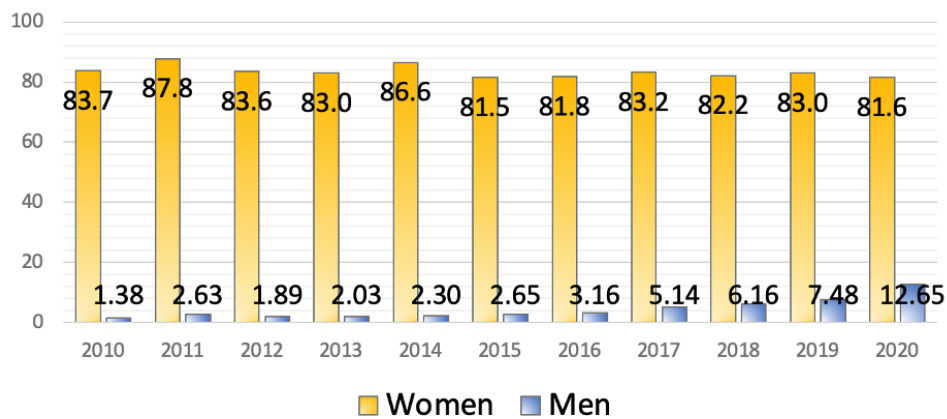
the First Three Years” by stating that there is no reasonable basis for the absolute necessity of mother-child bonding. Instead, as other experts argue, it explains that the quality of love by caretakers including mothers, fathers, and other adults, is the most essential factor in healthy child development. In addition, MHW (1998) states that mothers should be released from the burden and pressure around motherhood that treats women as the sole responsibility of their children. In this way, both academia and the government have challenged the “Myth of the First Three Years” by pointing out the uncertainty of the parenting theory underlying the myth.

However, the official denial of the “Myth of the First Three Years” did not release Japanese mothers from their burdens of child-rearing. For example, working mothers are criticized for not providing proper early childhood care if young children get sick, have mental health issues, or have trouble at school (Ōhinata, 2015). Also, Japanese mothers, who rely on childcare support, fear being blamed for their children’s misery or lack of love from their mothers. Kato and Nakatsubo (2018) describe this phenomenon as if “these mothers are under a child-rearing curse” (p. 62). Namely, Japanese mothers are pressured to be *good* mothers. The critical point here is that only mothers are subjected to criticism in parenting. One can now notice the gender implication of the myth: while this myth ostensibly attempts to enlighten children’s proper development, it designates women’s gender roles and traps mothers in a very limited figure of motherhood.

Not only is there the myth’s impact on mothers, but also the “Myth of the First Three

Years” has problematic effects on fathers. Shoji et al. (1998) point out that the myth confines mothers to primary parenting roles, while it excludes fathers from child-rearing responsibilities. For example, the childcare leave acquisition rate illustrates a significant gender gap in child-rearing as below.

Figure 1 - Childcare leave acquisition rate, 2010-2020



(Data adapted from MHLW, 2021)

In 2010, only 1.38% of fathers took childcare leave, while 83.7% of mothers took the leave (The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare; MHLW, 2021). Although fathers’ childcare leave rate has improved in the past decade, it remains at 12.65% in 2020 (MHLW, 2021). In this way, emphasizing the importance of only mother-child bonding has inevitably kept fathers away from parenting roles simultaneously. Even among double-income households, mothers mainly take care of small children, which indicates a huge gender gap in the involvement of childcare responsibilities. Even though the myth was already debunked, the practice that mothers should take care of their children remains, or shortly the gender division of child-rearing labour persists in Japan. In Chapter 4 of this thesis, I will examine gender inequality in child-rearing

labour, focusing on not only the father's lack of attention to childcare but also the widespread lack of awareness of fathers' participation in child-rearing in Japanese society.

Overall, existing studies assess the “Myth of the First Three Years” with various focal points, including child development theories as its origin and the highly questionable validity of the myth. However, there are several points not yet clarified in the existing literature. First, no research identified the origin of the myth and the reason for the focus on the first three years as the most critical period in a child's life. Also, no scholars delved into the relationship between the ideological dimension of the myth and the mechanism of myth-making, that has normalized women's primary role in parenting. Lastly, few studies have addressed why this myth still greatly influences Japanese parenting culture in the 2020s, even though many specialists have questioned it, and even the Japanese government officially denied it in 1998. This thesis addresses these gaps to expand the realm from scientific theories to social, cultural, and political impacts, revealing when and how these child development theories led to a prevailing motherhood myth, focusing on the age of three.

2.2 Dissecting “Motherhood” and “Myth”

The previous section reviewed existing literature about the “Myth of the First Three Years” and concluded that this myth had played a significant role in designating mothers' primary responsibility as caregivers for their children. More specifically, this myth popularized

the normative idea of socially acceptable motherhood—that is, mothers who are dedicated to childcare. In this section, I explore two main focal points of this myth, “motherhood” and “myth.” I begin with inquiring into how the notion of motherhood has been understood. I then examine the concept of “myth” to dissect its functions of normalizing a certain idea in society. Ultimately, this review illuminates how the “Myth of the First Three Years” perpetuates gender norms through the intersectional lens of motherhood and myth.

The feminist analysis of motherhood challenges the prevailing discourse of motherhood as women’s inborn instinct. Mothering and household management have been considered the most typical responsibilities for women, and this belief has created a cultural norm (Uno, 1991). Consequently, feminist scholars like Ann Oakley challenge three contemporary beliefs around motherhood: “...that all women need to be mothers, that all mothers need their children and that all children need their mothers” (As cited in Glenn, 1994, p. 9). These beliefs around motherhood also led to the concept that women’s reproductive roles are based on motherhood, and thus mother’s parenting is often regarded as a “natural, universal, and unchanging” practice (Glenn 1994, p. 3). Therefore, as Arendell (2000) argues, “womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience” (p. 1192). In this way, motherhood is widely acknowledged as a congenital function of women, and this understanding of motherhood equates biological women with mothers.

This common understanding among people is explicitly reflected in the definition of motherhood in Japan. While an English dictionary simply describes motherhood as the state of being a mother (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, n.d.), *Kōjien* (広辞苑) explains that *bosei* (母性, motherhood) is a natural quality that mothers have or a duty of mothers (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition, 2008). Likewise, *Kōjien* states that *bosei-ai* (母性愛, maternal affection) means mothers' congenital or instinctive love for their children. Clearly, in Japan, motherhood is officially considered as an inherent ability that all biological women naturally possess.

This notion of motherhood ties Japanese mothers to parenting responsibilities because of women's natural ability. Many Japanese people believe that women should be primarily responsible for child-rearing because it is *natural* for them to give birth, breastfeed, and raise their children (Ōhinata, 2015). This author emphasizes that the notion of motherhood leads people to think that letting others take care of their children (e.g. putting their children in daycare) is an action that defies women's nature. It is apparent how the daily use of the term *natural* serves as a rhetorical device to normalize women's obligation to their parental responsibility.

Despite the common view that women naturally possess motherhood, the idea that regards motherhood as an innate ability has been refuted by many feminist critics. In particular, feminist scholars argue that motherhood is not a natural ability but a socially constructed

concept (Arendell, 2000; Glenn, 1994; Hays, 1996; Kaplan, 1992). According to Arendell (2000), a scholar in contemporary feminist studies in the US, “mothering and motherhood are viewed as dynamic social interactions and relationships, located in a societal context organized by gender and in accord with the prevailing gender belief system” (p. 1193). Thus, the feminist analysis of gender norms suggests that motherhood and mothering should not be defined as a natural ability and behaviour tied to women’s reproductive function but as a normative belief and practice in a given social context.

The feminist analysis of motherhood as a socially constructed concept illuminates the relationship between gender ideology and motherhood. As Chodorow (1995) describes, gender ideology in a given society—e.g, ideologies of heterosexuality, male superiority, and female devaluation—affects individuals’ psyche and experiences around mothering. In a similar vein, Hays (1996), in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, conceptualizes contemporary North American mothering as an “intensive mothering ideology” (p. 9). The author demonstrates that the belief of ideal child-rearing underlies this ideology: Mothers, as the principal caregivers, should devote themselves to “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive” childcare, and all children are so innocent and special that they deserve such exclusive care (p. 8). In other words, the ideology of motherhood imposes and legitimizes women’s domesticity and devotion to childcare. In this way, American feminist theories today see motherhood as an ideology.

Likewise in Japan, some studies have cast light on motherhood as a concept that has been enforced based on political and economic imperatives, that is, a motherhood ideology. Tracing gender history suggests that the current idea of women's primary responsibility in parenting constructed relatively recently in Japan. Before the Meiji period (1868-1912), raising children was not necessarily an expected role for mothers (Koyama, 2013; Ueno, 1996). According to Ueno (1996), most mothers had to devote themselves not to child-rearing but to non-domestic labour, such as farming. The author continues to explain that child-rearing was the role of retired grandparents while breastfeeding, one of the most ideal child-rearing responsibilities for modern mothers, was the role of nannies or poor, lower-class women. Notably, the contemporary Japanese mothering that requires dedicated care for their own children was not a norm for mothers in the premodern period.

It was not until the Meiji period (1868-1912) that the current mother-centred parenting appeared. After the Meiji restoration that aimed for civilization and enlightenment, women were expected to follow the concept of "Good Wife, Wise Mother" (Muta, 2006; Niwa, 1993). This concept was part of a national ideology that placed women at home, where they were required to be excellent wives and mothers (Muta, 2006; Koyama, 2013). To be more specific, the Meiji government enlightened citizens to develop the country and assigned female citizens a role of taking care of their children; these ideas were reflected in the system of girls' education which aimed to cultivate knowledge and skills needed for future good wives and wise mothers

(Koyama 2013). In this way, women during the Meiji period were expected to become ideal mothers to contribute to the state. It is evident that mother's primary responsibility as caregivers is based on political imperatives.

In the Taishō period (1912-1926), motherhood and maternal love became increasingly emphasized, which is defined as maternalism (母性主義, *bosei shugi*) during the first-wave feminism in Japan (Ehara, 2009). The Japanese term *bosei* emerged in Japan as a translation of a foreign concept of motherhood in this period (Kanō, 1991; Niwa, 1993; Ōhinata, 1988b). Niwa (1993) explains that a pioneering feminist Hiratsuka Raichō's 1919 *Bosei no fukkō* (母性の復興), a translation of Ellen Key's *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, first used *bosei* as a book title. The author also emphasizes how several books, such as *Fujin no shimei* (婦人の使命, *Women's Vocation*) (Shimoda, 1922), popularized the concept of maternal love as women's natural ability essential to raise children. As a result, Kanō (1991) points out that the concept of motherhood impacted women's identity even more than "Good Wife, Wise Mother." This is because while "Good Wife, Wise Mother" designated women's roles and responsibilities, motherhood signified women's existence value itself. In this way, once the concepts of motherhood and maternal love were introduced in Japan, women's primary role as caregivers was emphasized as women's natural ability and identity.

Yet, from the Taisho period (1912-1926) to the early Shōwa period (1926-), women needed to work because of the labour shortage. Miyake (1991) points that women's labour was

differentiated along class lines; a large number of lower-class women from the countryside engaged in physical labour, such as in the textile industry. As explained in Hosoi Wakizō's (1925) *Jokō Aishi* (女工哀史), a fictional report focused on female workers at cotton-mill factories, women's work conditions in factories were especially arduous. Considering the challenging work conditions in factories, Tachibanaki (2008) describes that women's roles as primary caregivers for their children were the dream for women. Thus, while the concept of motherhood was popularized, there was a gap between the gender norms and the reality of class inequality, where working-class women could not fulfill the expected gender roles.

During the wartime period, the ideology of motherhood was further promoted for the government's pronatalist policy. According to Ogino (2014), the Japanese government implemented measures to increase the birth rate under the slogan, *umeyo, fuyaseyo* (give birth and multiply). The Guidelines for Establishing Population Policy (*Jinkō seisaku kakuritsu yōkō*) in 1941 indicated a population goal of 100,000,000 by 1960 and expected an average of five children in each household (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 1941). In order to achieve these goals, this guideline outlined the key measures including support of marriage preparation, girls' education to enhance motherhood, benefits for households with many children, discouragement of young women's employment, and prohibition of birth control such as abortion. Thus, the wartime government promoted the normative idea of motherhood to boost the childbirth rate through the motherhood protection

measures.

In the 1960s, during Japan's rapid economic growth, expected gender roles in the family became more apparent. In this period, the Japanese government promoted a certain family model with men engaging in industry and women staying at home to fulfil domestic responsibilities, under the slogan, "men go to work, women stay at home" (Ōsawa, 2007; Sawabe, 2017; Shiota, 1992). Consequently, this women's role as a primary responsibility of domestic work became officially established as "full-time housewives" (専業主婦, *sengyō shufu*) (Ochiai, 1989; Ōhinata, 1988b; Ueno, 1987). Hayashi's (1970) statement from his book, *Maternal Health* (母性保健, *Bosei Hoken*), gives us a glimpse into how motherhood was considered during this period: "A woman's life is all about becoming a mother and acting as a mother. Becoming a mother is a woman's privilege that a man cannot perform" (Ōhinata, 1988, p. 43). Similar to Ann Oakley's 1970s description, devoting themselves to being mothers was described as women's sole identity and their central life's purpose. In this way, the encouragement to be full-time housewives and the belief in motherhood were closely associated with and normalized the idea that staying home for family was women's mission and happiness.

Modern Japanese history illustrates how women's normative role has been designated over time in accordance with political and economic imperatives in each period, such as nation-building in the Meiji period, maternalism in the Taisho period, and economic growth in the

postwar period. Mothers and child-rearing roles initially had no absolute connection; it has been merely a century since the current concept of motherhood, which is based on maternal love and equates women to parenting, was popularized in Japan. In particular, the image of the devoted mother who dedicates herself to raising their children at home is a relatively new gender norm realized and established after the 1960s, triggered by Japan's rapid economic growth. This examination highlights that motherhood is not a natural ability but a prevailing notion, which is strongly ideological, and influenced by political and social situations.

Lastly, I examine the term “myth,” another important key to understanding the “Myth of the First Three Years.” As seen earlier, *Kōjien* (広辞苑) defines myth as “a story which is believed to be absolute, even though it is unfounded” (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition, 2008).¹ Indeed, if a story was scientifically proven, people would not call it a myth. Thus, myth already contains the assumption that the story is unreliable. However, despite its questionable empirical foundation, myth strongly impacts people's belief.

In order to explore the reason for the myth's impact, I borrow Roland Barthes' theories of myth-making described in his book, *Mythologies*. Barthes (1972) explains the relationship between myth and ideology by stating that “myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society” (p. 142). He points out that ideology will become so natural and simple that people will believe it without hesitation once myth is widely

¹ *Kōjien* provides two definitions about “myth,” but in this research project, I refer to this definition which includes a figurative meaning more appropriate for the “Myth of the First Three Years.”

embraced. The author describes this inversion of ideology as a “conjuring trick” of myth (p. 142). Therefore, myth functions to naturalize an ideology, and in so doing, people believe the ideology is a non-political, natural phenomenon, just as the sky is blue.

The dissection of each term reveals the close relationship between motherhood and myth. A feminist perspective suggests that motherhood is an ideology. Barthes’ (1972) theory explains that myth has the function of naturalizing an ideology. Applying the framework of motherhood and myth to the “Myth of the First Three Years,” the core premise of this myth is the naturalness of motherhood. In other words, the myth naturalizes the ideology of motherhood, and thus, standardizes gender norms of women’s primary role in child-rearing.

However, the framework of motherhood and myth does not explain the critical boundary of three years old in this myth. How did this Japanese motherhood myth, which promotes the naturalness of mothers’ role as caregivers, incorporate the importance of the first three years? In the next chapter, I will broaden the scope of the discussion and delve into the ideology of motherhood that is unique to Japan. By exploring the Japanese ideology of motherhood and its relationship to the critical period up to the age of three, I will unravel the origin of the “Myth of the First Three Years.”

Chapter 3: Development of the Japanese Ideology of Motherhood

In this chapter, I will turn to the core of the “Myth of the First Three Years,” focusing on its ideological dimension. First, I will use the frameworks of motherhood and myth to illuminate the key ideas associated with the “Myth of the First Three Years.” Next, I will identify images and roles of ideal motherhood dictated by the “Myth of the First Three Years,” that is, the ideology of motherhood normalized in contemporary Japan. Finally, I will approach the close relationship between the Japanese ideology of motherhood and the emergence of the “Myth of the First Three Years.” By doing so, this chapter aims to clarify the link between the contemporary Japanese ideology of motherhood and the “Myth of the First Three Years.”

3.1 Japanese full-time housewives, “*senkyō shufu*”

In Chapter 2, I investigated the historical and cultural aspects of the Japanese ideology of motherhood from the Meiji period (1868-1912) to the post-war period until the 1960s. Tracing the history of mothers’ roles in Japan suggests that motherhood idealized by the “Myth of the First Three Years” differs from the “Good Wife, Wise Mother” in the Meiji period, which allows this chapter to narrow down the assumption of the time of the myth’s emergence. On the one hand, the “Good Wife, Wise Mother,” a slogan promoted by the modern government, expected mothers to provide good education to children as a national mission. On the other

hand, full-time housewives, which have been prevalent since the 1960s, are associated with the concept of motherhood that regards parenting as a women's natural role and identity. In addition, as seen in Chapter 2, the current research on the "Myth of the First Three Years" suggests that this myth is not an ancient legend but a relatively new norm that emerged after rapid economic growth in the 1960s. Thus, considering the historical embeddedness of motherhood, this section discusses the emergence of the "Myth of the First Three Years," focusing on Japan's rapid economic growth and the economic crisis after the 1960s. In addition, this section investigates how this myth adopted and popularized the first three years old as a critical period of a child's life.

3.1.1 The rapid economic growth and gendered labour (1960s-1970s)

First, I will examine the gender division of labour, especially the roles of women during Japan's rapid economic growth from the 1960s to the early 1970s. As seen in the previous chapter, the normative role of Japanese housewives was established during this period (Ochiai, 1989; Ōhinata, 1988b, 2015; Ueno, 1987). During this time of economic growth, Japanese wives were encouraged to focus on housework while supporting their corporate-employed husbands (often described as "*kigyō-senshi*", 企業戦士; corporate warriors) under the slogan, "men go to work, women stay at home" (Ōsawa, 2007; Sawabe, 2017; Shiota, 1992). Data from 1969 indicates that about 80% of women quit their jobs to become housewives:

51.9% quit their jobs before or after marriage, and 31.8% quit before or after childbirth (Ministry of Labor, Women and Youth Bureau, 1969). Thus, leaving their career upon marriage to become housewives, called “*kotobuki taisha*” (寿退社, congratulatory resignation), was a common choice among Japanese women, which Ochiai (2005) describes as “housewifization” of women (Ochiai, 2005, p. 16). Consequently, the Japanese term “*sengyō shufu*” (専業主婦; full-time housewives)” appeared in the early 1970s to describe women who fulfill domestic work as their main role (Ueno, 1987). Therefore, women’s unpaid reproductive work supported Japan’s rapid economic growth, and at the same time, economic prosperity further enabled women to engage in domestic labour without having a paid job.

Along with the enhancement of the full-time housewife role, the importance of child-rearing roles by mothers widely popularized in Japan. For example, TV programs actively promoted prescriptive roles for mothers in child-rearing. In Japan, television broadcasting rapidly increased since the late 1950s (NHK, n.d.). At the time, some TV programs targeting children came into popular. For example, Japan’s public broadcaster, *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai* (NHK) started airing “*Okaasan to issho*” (おかあさんとっしよ, Together with Mom) in 1959, which has continued ever since. In addition, Fuji Television broadcasted “*Mama to Asobou! Ping Pong Pang*” (Let’s play with mom! Ping Pong Pang) from 1966 to 1982 and its theme song was a great hit among children. As the titles of these shows clearly illustrate, those who spent time with children were always their mothers. Namely, child-rearing was indicated

as nothing but mothers' roles.

Academic articles also started to support a mother-child relationship in the late 1960s in Japan. While some scholars had already introduced overseas studies of a parent-child relationship in the late 1950s, psychologist Kojima introduced a mother-child relationship in the late 1960s (Yamamoto, 2010). Yamamoto (2010) points out that Kojima's 1968 book, *Mother-Child Relations in Infancy*, introduced the concept of child attachment to a "person or object" but replaced all the targets with a "mother." It is apparent that the promotion of mothers' child-rearing role in this period influenced the introduction of a psychological theory and created a view of the mother-child bond unique to Japan.

In addition, the media also served to transmit an ideal image of mothers based on the concept of motherhood. The Japanese government promoted a song, *Kaasan no Uta* (かあさんのうた; Mother's Song), to convey a strong image of devoted, caring, and hardworking mother who served her family (Holloway & Nagase, 2014). This song depicts a mother who knits a pair of mittens for her son by staying up all night in a cold winter. This song became a big hit in 1962 when a popular singer of the time sang it in NHK's short song program, "*Minna no Uta*" (みんなのうた; Songs for Everyone) (Ikeda, n.d.). The song was subsequently included in school music textbooks from 1965 to the 1980s (Nichigai Associates, 2011). The following lyrics of this song give a glimpse of the expected image of a mother by the Japanese government after the 1960s.

Lyrics of *Kaasan no Uta* (excerpts from the first part only)

Mom worked hard through the night,
knitted a pair of mittens for me.
To keep my hands from a wintry blast,
knitted them so hard for me.
A message from my hometown,
with a smell of a hearth.

Translated from website: Ikeda Sayuri なつとく童謡・唱歌
<https://www.ne.jp/asahi/sayuri/home/doyobook/doyo00sengo.htm#kaasannouta>

In this way, since the arrival of television to the Japanese public in the late 1950s, gender norms spread among Japanese people through the media, enhancing the image of mothers who devoted themselves to child-rearing. This norm of the mother-child relationship supported the gender role of a full-time housewife. This suggests the continuity of the ideology of motherhood underpinning the gender division of child-rearing labour in postwar Japan.

At the same time child-rearing was linked to the roles of full-time housewives, the keyword “three-year-old children” frequently appeared in the 1960s. For instance, in 1961, the Ministry of Welfare in Japan started municipal health examinations for three-year-old children (MHLW, 2018). Some specialists such as Koyanagi (2011) and Ozawa (1989) point that this health examination was one of the *hitozukuri* (human resource development) policies by former Ikeda Cabinet. The *hitozukuri* policies included providing good-quality public education to children to cultivate competent human resources (Tanaka, n.d.). Most Japanese children enter

pre-school (幼稚園, *yōchien*) at the age of three. Thus, the government wanted to establish a system where mothers would be responsible for providing excellent care for their children at home until their children were exposed to formal education under a slogan, “until the age of three, by mothers’ hands.”

Similar to the concept of child-rearing by mothers seen earlier, media also contributed to popularizing the keyword “three-year-old children.” In 1964, NHK broadcasted a child-rearing instruction TV program entitled “Three-Year-Old Children (三歳児, *sansaiji*)” (NHK, n.d.). This program was broadcast from 1964 to 1965 and gained significant popularity. Following this TV program, the book of the same title was published in 1966, and it had a catchy byline to draw mothers’ attention: “The perfect guide for the precious childcare of the first three years!” (Ozawa, 1989, p. 82). It is apparent that, along with the government’s health examination for children three years of age, the TV program by Japan’s public broadcast catalyzed the awareness that the first three years of life was a crucial period of children’s growth.

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, multiple parenting magazines and books were consistently published to introduce the importance of child education before the age of three. For example, monthly magazines focusing on child-rearing, such as *Baby Age* in 1969 and *My Baby* (わたしの赤ちゃん) in 1973, started to publish (Shoji et al., 1998; Tendo et al., 2002). Shoji et al.’s (1998) research on issues of *Baby Age* published from 1971 to 1973 indicates that articles published at this time focused on developmental psychology or brain psychology of

young children aged under three years. Similarly, in the best-seller parenting book, *Kindergarten is Too Late* (幼稚園からでは遅すぎる), Ibuka (1971) repeatedly highlights the importance of early childhood education before the age of three as the most critical period of human life. The author asserts that the composition of brain cells is fixed by the time children are three years old, and the brain can absorb anything during this period. Whereas the English version of this book is translated to “kindergarten,” which refers to the year before Grade 1 in elementary school in Canada, the original version refers to “*yōchien*” (幼稚園), an institution for children aged between three to six years old. As seen in the title of Ibuka’s (1971) book, parenting books after the 1960s describe that early childhood education is a must, rather “too late” to start it after the age of three. Thus, “three years old” became a key phrase in Japanese parenting through the government’s initiatives and the media.

Ibuka’s (1971) book also emphasized a mother as an inevitable figure for early education before three years old. Chapter 3 of this book, entitled “Only mothers can provide true early childhood education,” strongly asserts that a mother is the only person who can give their children a proper early education. In this chapter, the author explains that only mothers can raise well-balanced children, both mentally and physically. This book by Ibuka (1971), is still famous in Japan as the legendary parenting bible, which has been read by 1.2 million people and has been reprinted many times since its first edition in 1971 (Sunmark Publishing, n.d.). In this way, Ibuka’s (1971) book contributed to popularizing the idea of mothers’ caring

roles during children's first three years.

The study by Shoji et al. (1998) on parenting books published from the 1930s to the 1990s provides insight into how mothers were considered the principal supporters of early childhood education. The following table shows the list of parenting books from the 1930s to the 1990s and indicates the books which have the word "three years old" or "mom" in the title.

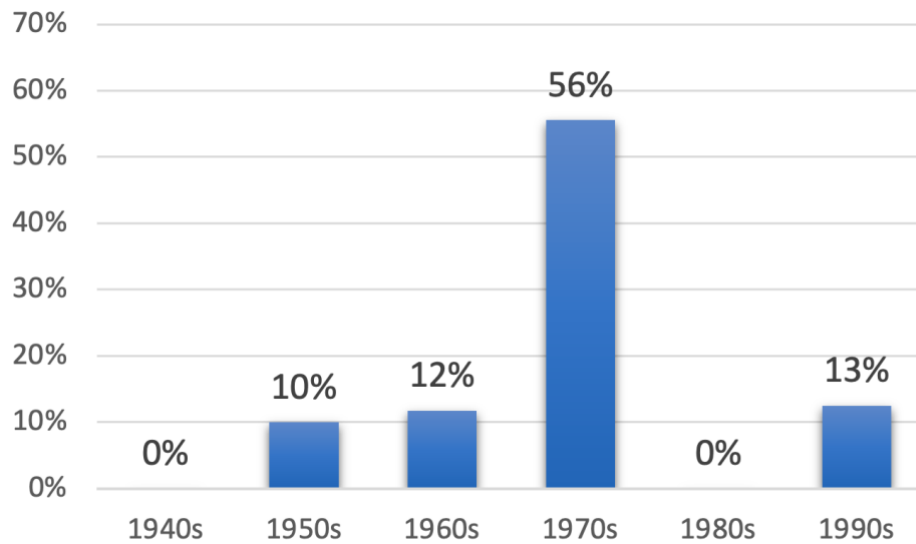
Table 1 - Research of parenting books from the 1930s to the 1990s

No.	Year	Japanese title	English title	In title	
				3 years old	Mom
1	1945	育児手帳	Childcare Handbook		
2	1947	育児実習書	Child-rearing practice book		
3	1947	やさしい育児問答	Easy childcare questions and answers		
4	1948	病気をさせぬ新育児法	A new way of child-rearing for healthy babies		
5	1951	赤ちゃんの育て方	How to raise a baby		
6	1954	ママさん文庫①赤ちゃんの育て方	Mama-san Bunko (1) How to raise a baby		x
7	1955	上手な育児・下手な育児	Good parenting, bad parenting		
8	1956	完全な育児365日	Perfect childcare 365 days		
9	1956	育児全書	Complete book on childcare		
10	1957	お産と育児	Childbirth and childcare		
11	1957	育児の辞典	Dictionary of Child Care		
12	1957	これからの育児・これからの家庭	The future of childcare, the future of the family		
13	1958	赤ちゃんの上手な育て方	How to raise a baby well		
14	1959	幼児の健康と保育	Infant Health and Child Care		
15	1960	育児のプラン	Childcare Plans		
16	1960	はじめての赤ちゃん	Your First Baby		
17	1960	たのしい育児としつけ	Fun Child Care and Discipline		
18	1961	新しい育児教室	New Parenting Class		
19	1962	赤ちゃん百科	Baby Encyclopedia		
20	1964	こども三面鏡	Children's Three-Sided Mirror		
21	1964	ママの育児ぶり診断	Diagnosis of Mom's Child-rearing Behavior		x
22	1966	強い子弱い子-育児の医学と教育-	Strong child, weak child - Medicine and education of child rearing		
23	1966	0~3才<育児のポイント>ママたちはこう育てた	0-3 years old <Points of child rearing> How mothers raised their children	x	x
24	1967	暮らしにあわせた育児の知恵	The wisdom of child rearing in accordance with life		
25	1967	幼児の心とからだ-育児・しつけ・病気-	The mind and body of an infant: child care, discipline, and illness		
26	1967	小児科医がお答えします	A pediatrician answers your questions		
27	1967	赤ちゃんの心とからだの本	Baby's Mind and Body		
28	1967	赤ちゃんの発達	Baby's Development		
29	1968	幼児のしつけ-感情・才能・生活習慣-	Infant Discipline: Emotions, Talents, and Habits		
30	1968	育児としつけ百科	Encyclopedia of Child Care and Discipline		
31	1969	育児の相談百科	Encyclopedia of Child Care		
32	1970	まちがいだらけのママ-子どもからの訴え-	Mistakes Mothers Make - Complaints from Children		x
33	1971	育児書を読む前に	Before Reading a Parenting Book		
34	1971	ミセスの育児書0-2歳	Child Care Book for Mrs., 0-2 years old		x
35	1972	ママさん文庫⑥育児のコツ12章	Mama's library (6) 12 chapters of tips for raising children		x
36	1973	赤ちゃんを育てる基礎技術	Basic Techniques for Raising a Baby		
37	1977	新しい母と子の育児全書	The New Mother and Child Child Care Book		x
38	1978	赤ちゃんからママこうして欲しいの	I want my mom to do this to me - from baby		x
39	1979	改訂育児学	Revised Child Care Studies		
40	1979	育児としつけの百科	The Encyclopedia of Child Care and Discipline		
41	1980	最新赤ちゃん百科	The Latest Baby Encyclopedia		
42	1980	心とからだ 育児の百科	Mind and Body Encyclopedia of Child Care		
43	1982	子ども・健康・食生活	Children, Health and Diet		
44	1983	小児科相談室	Pediatric Consultation Room		
45	1984	新育児百科	New Child Care Encyclopedia		
46	1985	五感の育児	Parenting with the five senses		
47	1985	新育児百科	New Child Care Encyclopedia		
48	1988	0~3歳<最新>安心育児	0-3 years old <Latest> Safe Child Care	x	
49	1988	イラスト安心育児のすべて	Illustrated, All about safe childcare		
50	1988	はじめての赤ちゃん	The first baby		
51	1989	はじめての赤ちゃん-安心育児のすべて-	First time baby - all about safe child care		
52	1989	赤ちゃん百科	Baby Encyclopedia		
53	1990	赤ちゃんハンドブック	Baby Handbook		
54	1990	らくらくお産とすくすく育児	Easy Childbirth and Healthy Child Care		
55	1991	妊娠・出産・育児 安心赤ちゃん百科	Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Child-Rearing Safe Baby Encyclopedia		
56	1992	子育てママへ 保健婦からひとこと	A word from a public health nurse to child-rearing mothers		x
57	1992	わたしの赤ちゃん育児の本	My Babycare Book		
58	1992	ひとりひとりのお産と育児の本	A book on childbirth and childcare for each individual		
59	1993	0~3才個性を伸ばす能力を育てる	Nurturing the ability to develop individuality in children aged 0 to 3	x	
60	1994	育児なんでも相談	Consultation on anything about childcare		

(Data adapted from Shoji et al., 1998)

According to the data from the authors, while only 10-12% of parenting books had “mom” or “mother” in their titles in the 1950s and 1960s, the percentage increased to 56% in the 1970s.

Figure 2 - Percentage of parenting books with “mom” or “mothers” in a title



(Data adapted from Shoji et al., 1998)

In this way, many parenting books and magazines in the 1970s highlighted mothers’ roles as primary caregivers and educators of their children. In such a manner, these two notions, “early education before the age of three” and “by mothers,” fused and promoted one child-rearing theory so full-time housewives could engage in their gender roles as primary caregivers. Consequently, this child-rearing theory became the essential guideline to encourage the parenting practice based on “until the age of three, by mothers’ hands.”

3.1.2 Japanese-style welfare society and reinvented parenting traditions (1970s-1980s)

In contrast to the rapid economic growth of the 1960s, Japan experienced an economic

slump in the 1970s. The effect of this economic crisis due to stagflation triggered by the first oil shock in 1973 was that men could not earn enough to support their families anymore, which meant households needed a double income (Ōsawa, 2007; Ueno, 1987). Accordingly, after 1974, the percentage of full-time housewives began to decline, and more married women sought work (Shiota, 1992). In short, the economic crisis started to collapse the male breadwinner model of Japanese families, once promoted a slogan, “men go to work, women stay at home.”

The Japanese government facing this economic crisis came up with a plan to reduce public expenditure: Japanese-style welfare society. Japanese-style welfare society positioned households as the most vital part of society. Former Prime Minister Ōhira made the following speech to introduce Japanese-style welfare society in January 1979: “While preserving the structure of the Japanese people’s spirit of self-help, caring human relations, and mutual aid, we will strive to establish fair and vibrant Japanese-style welfare society that combines this structure with the appropriate public welfare” (Hori, 1981, p. 38). Those who were expected to perform this social service at home were full-time housewives. The Japanese government considered public facilities for elder care and childcare did not need to expand because full-time housewives could handle such care at home. Considering the government’s intention, the approach of “until the age of three, by mothers’ hands” was the cheapest and most efficient way to implement the national financial plan for childcare (Ōsawa, 2007). Thus, the Japanese

government wanted to keep full-time housewives at home to engage in unpaid work, especially as caregivers, so that the state could reduce the budget for public services. In this way, Japanese-style welfare society, which preached the importance of care within the family, further promoted the gendered role of full-time housewives.

In the 1980s, Japanese-style welfare society was amplified by new policies that aimed to benefit households consisting of working husbands and housewives. The Japanese government promoted policies that both strengthened the position of housewives and favoured single-income households, which reinforced the male-breadwinner model (Ōsawa, 2007; Shiota, 1992). For example, in 1985, the Basic Pension introduced a category called Category III Insured Persons that exempts housewives from their insurance fees (Yamasaki, 2021). Moreover, the special exemption for spouses, which began in 1987, exempted housewives whose earnings are below a certain amount from income tax (Ida, 2014). These exemption systems have yearly income limit, and thus minimizing wives' working hours. To earn extra money for the household, wives work as part-time or irregular employees within "the barrier of 1.03 million yen" (*103-man no kabe*, 103 万の壁) per year (Ida, 2014, p. 14). As seen in the term "housewives with a part-time job" (*kengyō shufu*, 兼業主婦) (Ueno, 1987, p. 80), their earnings were merely a supplement to their husbands' earnings, and married women's first priority was always to be housewives. Therefore, the tax benefit system made it difficult for housewives to break away from their position as dependents on their husbands while sustaining

the gender division of labour desirable for Japanese-style welfare society.

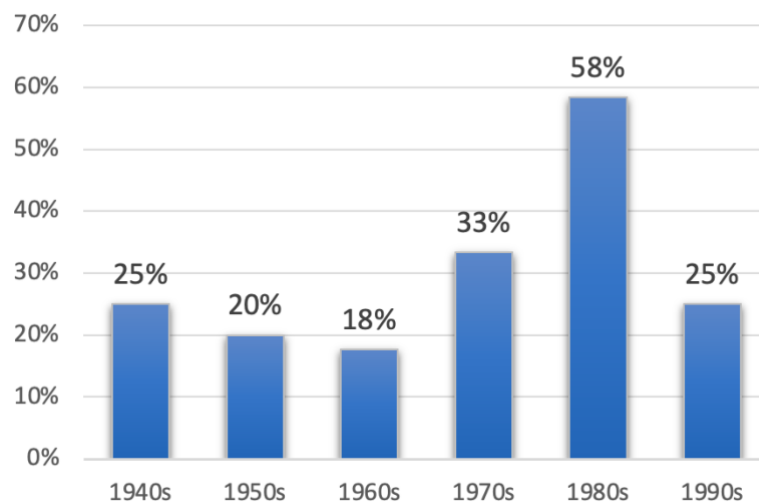
In this way, from the 1970s to the 1980s, the Japanese government again emphasized the role of full-time housewives, but this time, for reducing national expenditures in the economic crisis. Although the economic situation changed from rapid growth to a slump, Japanese women's roles remained unchanged. Rather, being housewives and devoting themselves to housework allowed women to gain better access to the government subsidies; their gender roles were institutionally established, strengthened, and secured by the social systems.

With the demand for more full-time housewives, a Japanese proverb often appeared in the 1980s to promote the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love, the motto of child-rearing for full-time housewives. As seen in Chapter 2, an old Japanese proverb, “*mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made*” (三つ子の魂百まで), means that the soul of a three-year-old child lasts until one hundred years old. This 200-year-old proverb frequently appeared in the Japanese government's documents. For example, in 1983, the Japanese government distributed pamphlets entitled *Mitsugo no Tamashii Hyaku Made* at municipal health examinations for three-year-old children (Ozawa, 1989). In addition, in 1984, the National Council for the Development of Youth published a child-rearing booklet entitled *Mitsugo no Tamashii Hyaku Made: The Future of Family Education* (三つ子の魂百まで これからの家庭教育) to strengthen people's awareness of the first three years of life as the crucial point

(Shoji et al., 1998). Clearly, the government aggressively used this proverb to direct people’s attention to the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love throughout the nation.

Consequently, many parenting books started to use this proverb to support the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love. The following graph shows the frequency “*mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made*” was mentioned in published parenting books from the 1940s to the 1990s using research by Shoji et al. (1998). While merely 20-30% of parenting books mentioned this proverb before the 1970s, nearly 60% of the parenting books published in the 1980s mention this proverb to emphasize the importance of a child’s life before three years old.

Figure 3 - Percentage of parenting books that mention *Mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made*



(Data adapted from Shoji et al., 1998)

All these books support the importance of early education before three years old. For example, most of them emphasize this child-rearing theory by starting “as an old proverb ‘*mitsugo no*

tamashii hyaku made demonstrates...” (Shoji et al., 1998, p. 225). Thus, although this proverb existed before 1813, it frequently appeared in child-rearing books and pamphlets in the 1980s as a proof of the child-rearing theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love.

In summary, in the 1980s, Japanese-style welfare society during the economic crisis expected housewives to engage in domestic work to reduce the national budget for public care services. Along with the new launch of preferential systems for housewives, the Japanese government needed to remind wives to stay with their children. Therefore, the government took advantage of this proverb to reinforce the gendered division of caring labour and, thus, naturalized mothers’ caregiving responsibility as if it had been an old tradition.

3.2 From a popular scientific theory to child-rearing norms

The previous section illustrates how aggressively the government’s measures and the media popularized the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love from the 1960s to the 1980s in Japan. However, the term “Myth of the First Three Years” did not appear until the late 1980s, even though this child-rearing theory is identical to this myth in that both stress a mother-child relationship during the children’s first three years. As seen earlier, myth is “a story which is believed to be absolute, even though it is unfounded (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition).” Yet, this child-rearing theory was believed under several bases, such as child development psychology and an old proverb. Namely, this theory was not a story which

was “unfounded” at this point. In this section, I examine the validity of the popular child-rearing theory and an old proverb to see how these two can support the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love.

First of all, I will explore the proverb, “*mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made,*” to determine if it substantiates today’s child-rearing theory. As seen in the previous section, this 200-year-old proverb frequently appeared to reinforce the importance of childhood before three years of age, especially in the 1970s. However, *mitsugo* (a three-year-old child) in this proverb does not precisely refer to three-year-old children. First, this proverb, which had existed at least since 1813, supposedly used the old Japanese counting system called *kazoedoshi* (数え年) (Ozawa, 1989; Tomita, 2012). *Kazoedoshi* is a traditional Japanese manner of reckoning one’s age, and it considers newborns as one year old (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition). In that case, a three-year-old child in this proverb actually refers to a two-year-old child if applying today’s counting system. Moreover, although this proverb can be literally translated into English as “the soul of a three-year-old child lasts until one hundred years old,” it indicates one’s nature will not change in their lifetime, as seen in Chapter 2 (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition). Namely, this proverb describes the importance of early childhood to a person’s entire life by figuratively using the phrase *mitsugo* (a three-year-old child). Therefore, this proverb does not specify an exact age whether it be two years old or three years old. For the reasons above, this proverb cannot be the grounds for claiming three years of age as the critical

point of a child's development.

Second, "*mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made*" does not indicate the importance of a mother-child relationship and maternal love. Whereas the proverb foregrounds early childhood as the foundation for lifelong outcomes, the recent theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love warns that the absence of these elements negatively affects a child's development. In other words, the child-rearing theory implies that mothers should stay home to look after their children. Given this, the proverb is not directly related to the child development theory on the necessity of the mother-child bond during the first three years. Evidently, the Japanese government took advantage of this old proverb in pamphlets to reinforce the importance of early childhood and recreated the proverb by adding a gender dimension to child-rearing responsibilities. Namely, the government utilized this 200-year-old proverb and invented a tradition that supports the gendered division of caregiving labour that aligns with the slogan "until the age of three, by mothers' hands."

Meanwhile, in the late 1980s, some Japanese specialists in the fields of psychology and early childcare started to question the child development theory on coherent childcare by biological mothers. As seen in Chapter 2, major studies of child development have warned the negative effects of maternal deprivation, a psychological term on the separation of young children from their mothers. For example, the theory of hospitalism by R.A. Spitz argues that children who grew up in orphanages are deprived of proper development due to absence of

their mothers (Uchida, 2010). However, scholars including Ōhinata (1988a, 1988b) and Shigeta (1988) challenge the mainstream studies on maternal deprivation by arguing that, rather than the lack of a mother-child bond, sanitary conditions at the facilities and an insufficient number of caregivers can cause disease in children in orphanages (Ōhinata, 1988a, 2015; Shigeta, 1988).

In addition, some scholars argue that children's spending time with their biological mothers does not always provide the best environment for children. Andry (1960) points out that the concept of maternal deprivation only focuses on the mother-child physical separation and ignores the psychological separation, such as mothers' inadequate affection or attention to children, so-called "masked deprivation" (Ōhinata, 1988a, p 33; Shigeta, 1988, p 9). Van den Berg (1972) also warns that inappropriate, excessive affection, rather than a lack of maternal love, has a negative impact on child development (Ōhinata, 1988a). Therefore, physical separation from biological mothers is not the only obstacle in child development.

Some studies point out that these scientific theories were politically used, by removing this skepticism when promoting the importance of maternal love in Japan. Ōhinata (1988a, 1988b) argues that the introduction of the maternal deprivation theory during Japan's rapid economic growth is strongly related to economic and political demands to place women at home as full-time housewives. Likewise, Ozawa (1989) argues that the concept linking mothers to childcare justified the gender norm, which placed full-time housewives in each household as service workers who would take on the responsibility of unpaid domestic work. As these

authors assert, introducing maternal deprivation without highlighting the controversies gave a strong scientific basis to this cultural peculiarity that had permeated Japan. In other words, as the old proverb seen earlier, the government utilized scientific theories to reinforce the mothers' caregiving roles for the ideal parenting practice, "until three years of age, mothers' hands."

3.3 Debunked child-rearing theory (Late 1980s-)

The previous section articulated how the proverb and scientific theories were used as ideological tools to promote women's primary caregiving roles. The Japanese government used these tools to draw people's attention and justify the gender norm of mothers' caring labour based on "until three years of age, mothers' hands." In this section, I will examine this child-rearing norm after the 1980s to identify how it relates to the term, "Myth of the First Three Years."

While several scholars argued against the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love, one author finally called this child-rearing theory a myth in 1989. Ozawa (1989) described that the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love as "a Three Years Old Myth (三歳神話, *sansai-shinwa*), which simultaneously features praise and threat for mothers" (p. 81). The author continues that the beliefs such as "until the age of three, by mothers' hands," "nothing is greater than maternal love," or "mother-child relationship in infancy structures the basis of human's personality" are nothing but myths that originated from

the government's demands to place women at home for engaging in their gender roles in parenting (p. 81). In this way, by challenging the gender aspects of the belief in the importance of mother-child bonding, the prevailing child-rearing theory during the period of the 1960s to 1980s was debunked and was called a myth in the late 1980s.

Although the time of the myth's emergence is quite vague among the existing studies, examining articles and parenting magazines published around the late 1980s can suggest when the myth emerged. Ueno (1987) mentions that the involvement of mothers up to the age of three is considered important as "maternal devotion to the first three years of the child's life" (p. 80). However, the author does not say this is a myth. Ōhinata, a significant contributor to the current research on the "Myth of the First Three Years," published two papers in 1988 as we saw earlier to argue about the child-rearing theory which emphasizes maternal love. However, neither one of the papers describes this theory as a myth. The same applies to Shigeta's 1988 paper which questions the theory about maternal deprivation. Likewise, the research by Shoji et.al (1998) about the table of contents in three parenting monthly magazines, *My Baby* (わたしの赤ちゃん), *Baby Age*, and *Chick Club* (ひよこクラブ), indicates that there is no explicit mention of the phrase "Myth of the First Three Years" from the 1960s to the 1980s. Thus, it is highly possible that the word myth was first used to debunk the prevailed child-rearing theory in Ozawa's 1989 paper.

This chronological overview in this chapter, from the early 1960s to the 1980s,

identified how a popular child-rearing theory was debunked and came to be called a myth in 1989. In some studies, the difference between the prevailing child-rearing theory and the myth is often mixed up. For example, *Kōsei Hakusho* (1998) states that the “Myth of the First Three Years” became popular in the 1960s influenced by Western studies about a mother-child relationship. Similarly, Uchida (2010) explains that the “Myth of the First Three Years” was popularized in the period of Japan’s rapid economic growth, which is the 1960s. Here, this thesis should make a clear distinction; the theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love was just a popular child-rearing theory until the late 1980s. This theory started to be called a myth after 1989 because its gender aspect that normalizes women’s caregiving role was debunked.

I want to stress that this order must not be confused because a popular child-rearing theory and a motherhood myth have different functions. The theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love, a motto of full-time housewives, was believed to be supported by evidence. However, after this child-rearing theory was debunked and called a myth, it has been believed to be absolute by the Japanese public “even though it is unfounded” (*Kōjien*, a Japanese dictionary, 6th edition, 2008). Accordingly, this ideological child-rearing theory, which is now called a myth, persuades people that child-rearing is the natural behaviour of mothers. This is because the myth’s function seen in Chapter 2 obfuscates the ideological dimension of the child-rearing theory and serves to naturalize mothers’ primary responsibility

of parenting. In this way, the “Myth of the First Three Years” has contributed to normalizing the gender division of care labour in Japan.

However, Chapter 2 of this thesis has already clarified the Japanese government officially denied this myth in 1998. In addition, although the government stated that mothers did not need to believe this myth, it remains influential in the 2020s and puts criticism on working mothers. The next chapter explores the 1990s in Japan after the prevailing child-rearing theory became a myth. I will examine what brought the Japanese government, the one who actively promoted this child-rearing theory, to refute this myth in 1998 and how it has significantly impacted the parenting culture in present-day Japan.

Chapter 4: The Changes and Challenges for Motherhood

The previous chapter examined the historical development of the Japanese ideology of motherhood from the 1960s to the 1980s and how it promoted one child-rearing theory. Japan's economic growth in the 1960s enabled wives to stay home without having paid jobs and engage in unpaid reproductive work. The slowed-down economic growth after the 1970s still encouraged wives to stay home; this time, the government expected unpaid domestic work by full-time housewives could reduce the national budget for child/elderly care services. In the meantime, a child-rearing theory, popularized in the 1960s to the 1980s, emphasized the first three years as a critical period of a child's life and the mother's love as an essential factor for the child's development during that period. Along with tax systems introduced to benefit full-time housewives, this child-rearing theory was ideal for encouraging them to engage in their roles.

In the late 1980s, however, some Japanese experts in psychology and early childcare started to question this child-rearing theory because of its insufficient basis and the way it confines women to the national ideology of motherhood. Consequently, in 1989, Ozawa denounced this child-rearing theory just a myth to express her doubt about its questionable principles. In this way, the child-rearing theory emphasizing three years old and maternal love was debunked by Japanese specialists who uncovered gender norms associated with the myth.

While this child-rearing theory began to be questioned, Japan faced a serious birthrate

decline. In 1989, the Japanese total fertility rate hit its lowest point, and thus the Japanese government needed new countermeasures. There have been limits to the policy of keeping women at home as full-time housewives since the economic crisis after the 1970s made it difficult for only husbands to earn enough for a household. The government needed a change in direction to make a society where couples wanted more children while both husbands and wives were working. Accordingly, in the 1990s, the Japanese government introduced new policies one after another to support working mothers. Furthermore, in the 2010s, the government started a campaign to encourage men's active participation in parenting. Thus, the government's orientation completely shifted from "men go to work, women stay at home" to support double-income families.

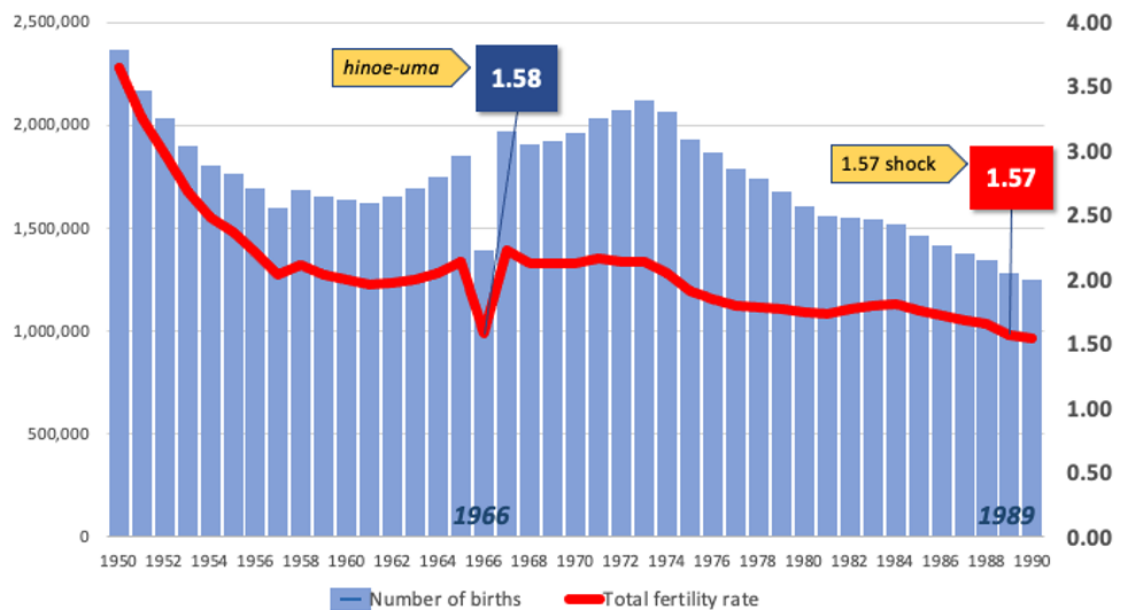
In this chapter, I will explore how various policies have changed the patterns of child-rearing and the gender division of labour since the late 1980s. Also, I will examine how the child-rearing theory, which was debunked as a myth in the late 1980s, continued to affect gender roles in parenting in families. In so doing, this chapter will investigate the impact of the ideological dimension of the motherhood myth through the various policies put forth by the Japanese government.

4.1 Japan's demographic turning point

Japan faced a turning point after the late 1980s in its demographic pattern. The "1.57

shock,” which refers to the decrease in the national fertility rate to 1.57 (children per woman), marked in 1989 the lowest rate that had ever happened (Cabinet Office, 2007; MHLW, 2020). Further back in history, many couples avoided having children in 1966 because of the widespread superstition that any female babies born in the year of *hinoe-uma* (丙午) will have a violent temper. The belief resulted in the lowest fertility rate of 1.58 in 1966 (Cabinet Office, 2007). The rate in 1989 was even lower than in the year of *hinoe-uma*, and it was a wakeup call to the Japanese government about the demographic crisis.

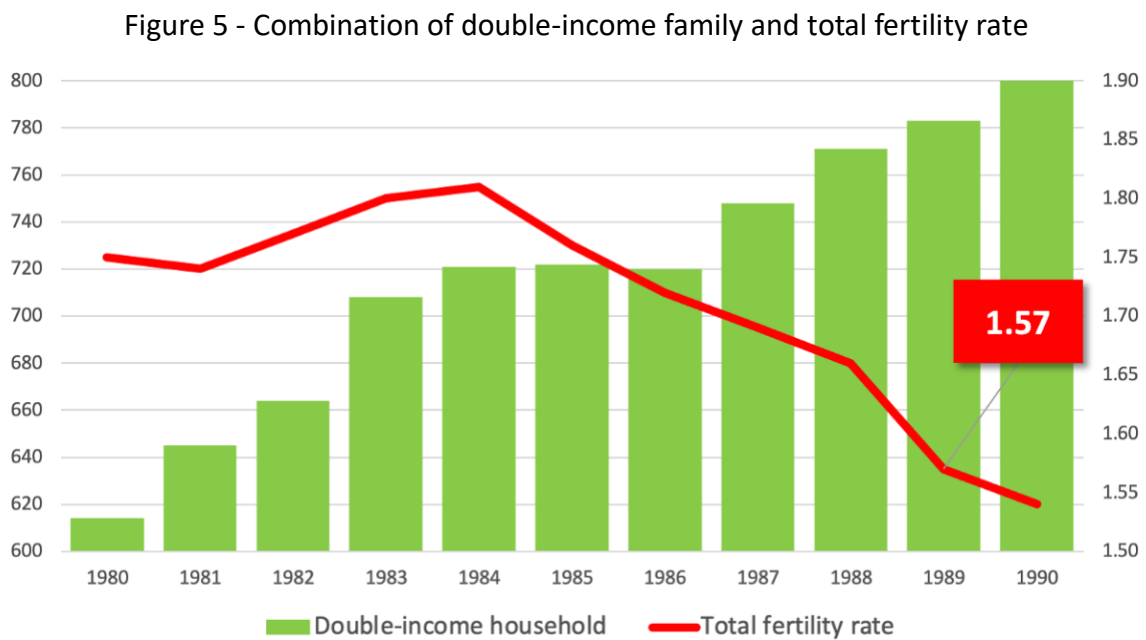
Figure 4 - Number of births and total fertility rate



(Data adapted from MHLW, 2020)

This declining fertility rate is related to women’s advancement in the labour force. As seen in Chapter 3, women’s employment rate has been rising since the late 1970s, leading to an increase in the number of dual-income families. With more women in the workforce, families have chosen to have fewer children. Combining the total fertility rate with the

transition to double-income households indicates how these figures are related; as the number of double-income households increases, the fertility rate decreases, showing an inverse relationship.

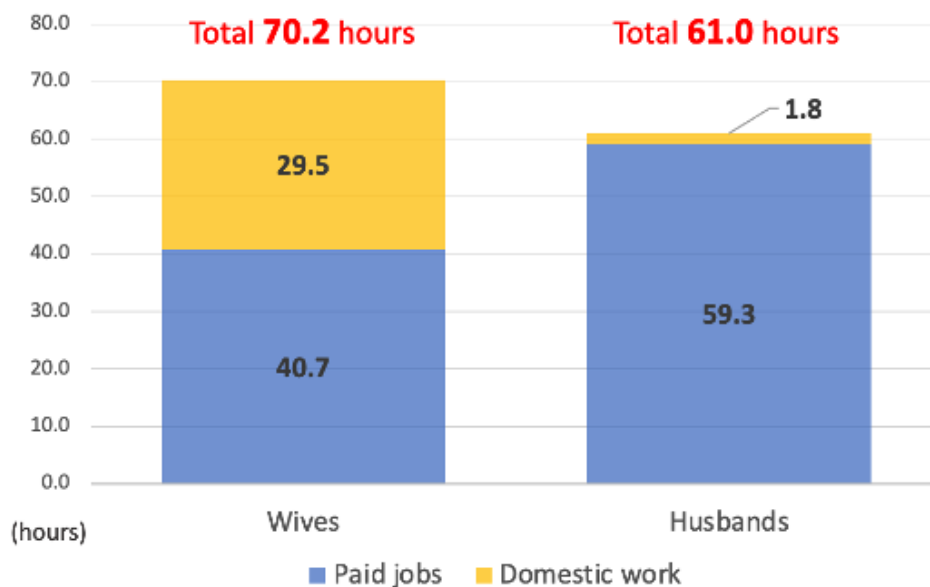


(Data adapted from MHLW, 2020; MLIT, 2013)

One of the reasons for the declining birth rate is that the gender division of household labour has remained the same even though more wives have worked in paid jobs since the late 1970s. Hochschild (1989) observed a similar situation in the US where wives joined the work force several years earlier than Japanese wives. In her research about the total working hours (including both paid job and domestic work) of American married couples in the 1960s and the 1970s, Hochschild (1989) notes that working hours of wives who had paid jobs were fifteen hours per week longer than their husbands. She describes the domestic work done by working wives after returning home as their “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989, p. 4). Likewise, the

following data collected in 1986 indicates that whereas the total number of hours of domestic work performed by Japanese working wives was nearly thirty hours per week, total hours of domestic work done by working husbands remained less than two hours per week (Cabinet Office, 2022).

Figure 6 - Average of working hours for double-income couples in 1986 (per week)



(The data adapted from Cabinet Office, 2022)

Similar to the case of the “second shift” of American women described by Hochschild (1989), Japanese women in double-income families tend to spend twice as much time as men doing housework. Namely, child-rearing and housekeeping were still duties that fell under the wives’ roles, whether they had paid jobs or not. Matsuda (2001) illustrates this new concept as the “new gender division of labour” (新・性別役割分業), which is based on “men go to work, women go to work and do housework” (Matsuda, 2001, p. 33). The increased burden on working wives who tend to juggle domestic and workplace responsibilities explains the reason

for the birth decline in Japan.

The wives' double labour, a new standard for gender roles in a double-income family, cast a light on new countermeasures for increasing the birth rate. The Japanese government realized that improving their working conditions would encourage mothers to have more children and remove difficulties in balancing paid jobs and child-rearing (Takayama, 2002). To address women's working and parenting conditions, the Japanese government introduced a series of new plans one after another in the early 1990s. First, the Japanese government implemented the Child Care Leave Act (*Ikuji kyūgyōhō*) in 1992 to protect women's right to take childcare leave and still be able to return to the same workplace after childbirth. In addition, the government enforced the Angel Plan in 1994 to enhance support for parents, including more daycare facilities to reduce mothers' burdens of caring responsibilities (Cabinet Office, 2021). Clearly, the Japanese government's plan for increasing the national birth rate focused on protecting working wives in double-income households.

In this way, Japan's declining birth rate led the Japanese government to launch a series of plans for supporting working mothers. These new plans were the exact opposite of the policies that protected full-time housewives before the 1980s. While policies introduced in the 1980s aided full-time housewives who stayed home without having a paid job, new policies in the 1990s benefited working wives to balance a paid job and child-rearing.

4.2 Debunked myth, lingering ideology

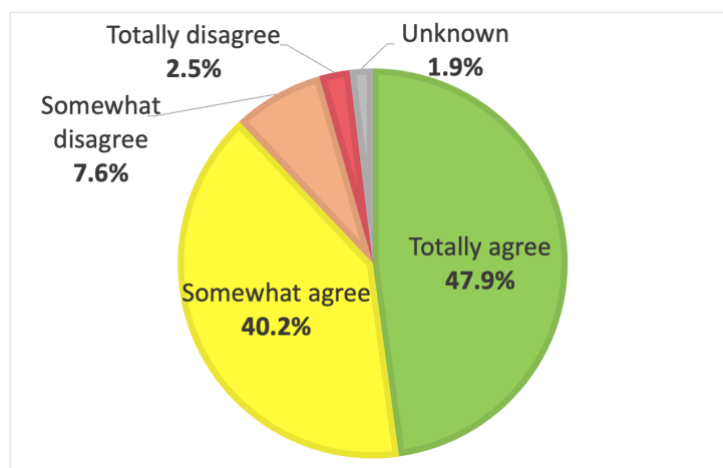
While the government aimed to counter the declining birth rate by introducing several policies supporting working mothers, the word “myth” frequently appeared in the 1990s papers and books to indicate doubts about the child-rearing theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love. For example, in a 1990 monthly journal, Ōhinata (1990) explains that this child-rearing theory is just a myth. In 1992, Funabashi (1992) used the term “Three Years Old Myth (三歳神話; *sansai-shinwa*)” which was the same as Ozawa’s (1989) description (Takayama, 2002). In 1994, while Ochiai (1994) also used the “Three Years Old Myth,” Takenaka (1994) used the “Myth of the First Three Years” in his paper (Shoji et.al., 1998). In 1997, in the weekly magazine *AERA*, Shigeri (1997) used “Three Years Old Child-rearing Myth (*sansai ikuji shinwa*) (Shoji et.al., 1998, p. 227). All these authors in the 1990s question and argue against this theory by using the word “myth,” just as several authors, including Ozawa (1989), did in the late 1980s.

With these articles and magazines, the phrase “Myth of the First Three Years” gained high recognition among Japanese people. Yamaoka and Shoji (1999) surveyed the awareness of this phrase among mothers of young children and female nurses in 1998. The results indicated that 73% of the participants answered that they were aware of the phrase. From their research, it appears that the public had a better awareness of the “Myth of the First Three Years,” related to the debunked theory emphasizing three years of age and maternal love, in the late

1990s in Japan.

However, the data indicates that debunking the myth did not necessarily lead to significant changes in gender norms and practices around child-rearing. The 1990s survey data shows that there were still quite a few people who believed that mothers should stay with their children while they were young. According to the National Census in 1992, nearly 90% of respondents agreed that mothers should restrain themselves from having a job to look after their children at home. In other words, only 10% believed that mothers did not need to give up their career while their children were young. (MHLW, 1992). The following chart captures data from a survey done in 1992 where respondents were asked whether they agreed that mothers should stay at home at least while their children are young.

Figure 7 - Survey in 1992, “Do you agree that mothers should not have a job but should stay at home at least while their children are young?”

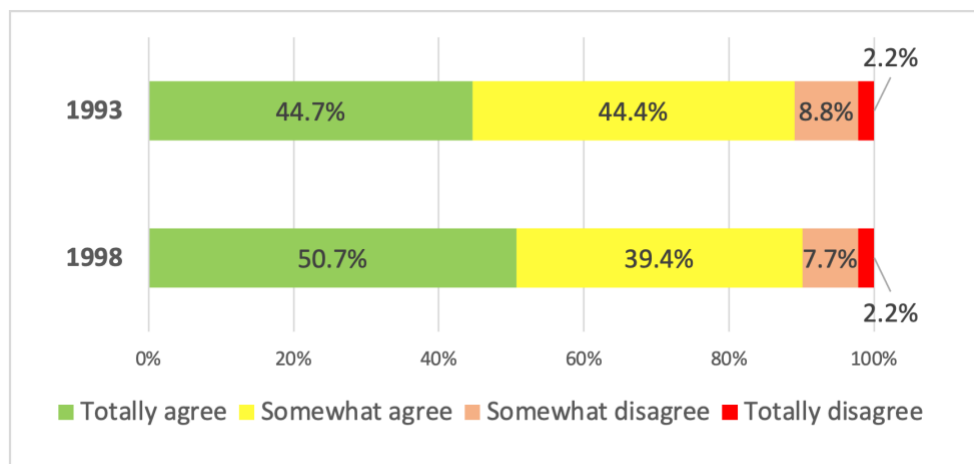


(Data adapted from MHW, 1992)

Moreover, national studies asked respondents if they agree that mothers should concentrate on childcare, specifically until their children turn three years old. Again, the data

indicates that approximately 90% of respondents agreed with the question. The following chart captures data from the survey done in 1993 and 1998, respectively.

Figure 8 - Survey in 1993 and 1998, “Do you agree that mothers should concentrate on childcare until their children turn three years old?”



(Data adapted from National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2000)

This survey indicates that the belief related to the absolute necessity of the mother-child relationship on child development did not fade out despite the government and academic efforts made to debunk the myth. Apparently, while people knew the term “Myth of the First Three Years” well, there was no significant change in widespread practices and normative ideas about motherhood. Instead, as the data above indicates, the number of people who believed that mothers should focus on childcare for children younger than three years of age even increased. Thus, the normative conception and practice of motherhood reinforced by this myth became a major obstacle to the Japanese government’s goal: a society where women could have more children while working.

This obstacle led the Japanese government to issue a major announcement about child-

rearing. In 1998 *Kōsei Hakusho* (厚生白書, White Paper on Health and Welfare), one section entitled “Mother and child” has the following subheading: “The ‘Myth of the First Three Years’ has no rational basis.” Here, MHW (1998) admits the bond between mother and child has been over-emphasized while fathers’ child-rearing responsibilities were overlooked. The next subheading, “the most important thing is the quality of love,” indicates that the quality of love from caregivers is not limited to maternal love or length of time spent with mothers. Finally, the last subheading, “mothers should be released from the excessive expectations and responsibilities of child-rearing,” supports gender equality in child-rearing responsibilities, which is followed by the conclusion that:

From now on, we hope that mothers will be released from the excessive expectations and responsibilities regarding child-rearing that have been placed on them in recent years. This will give mothers a relaxed mind to treat child-rearing with abundant affection, leading to a better mother-child relationship. (Translated from MHW, 1998, p. 59)

In this way, the Japanese government officially denied the “Myth of the First Three Years” to support the alleviation of women’s burden of child-rearing. However, as seen in the last sentence, the government’s statement unintentionally implies that child-rearing is a mother’s task, emphasizing a mother-child relationship. Therefore, the government’s debunking of the myth revealed the lingering effects of the mother’s naturalized parenting labour and failed to deconstruct the ideology of motherhood.

After the official denial of the myth in 1989, the Japanese government launched more new policies for gender-equal parenting. In 1999, the Japanese government enacted the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society to collapse conventional gender-based roles and promote a gender-equal society within the workplace, household, and the local community. This new policy in 1999 encouraged women to balance working and parenting and men to participate in housework actively. The Japanese government aimed to create a society where women and men cooperate, namely, a gender-equal society (男女共同参画社会; *danjo kyōdō sankaku shakai*).

In December of the same year, MHW proposed the New Angel Plan by renewing the Angel Plan of 1994 (Cabinet Office, 2009). The New Angel Plan of 1999 included more benefits to help women manage both career and domestic responsibilities. For example, one of the principals improved childcare systems for working parents, such as increasing daycare facilities, extending care hours, and expanding after-school care programs for school-aged children (Cabinet Office, 2009). Another noteworthy feature of the plan was the improvement of the work environment including the provision of childcare leave and shortened work hours after having a baby (Cabinet Office, 2009). Although childcare leave was officially introduced by the Child Care Leave Act in 1992, working parents barely took advantage of this system, especially male employees. According to data from 1996, 49.1% of women and 0.12% of men took childcare leave (MHLW, 2021). Against this backdrop, the New Angel Plan has ensured support not only for employees who take childcare leave but also for employers who grant the

childcare leave. Furthermore, this new plan calls for eliminating the fixed gender division of labour in the workplace and the Japanese work-first culture.

In this way, the Japanese government's goal, which once encouraged women to stay at home, completely shifted to establish a new parenting environment so that more women could work at paid jobs without hesitating to have children.

4.3 Japan's policies for gender-equal parenting: expectations and realities

In 1999, along with the promotion of the New Angel Plan, MHW presented a campaign poster encouraging fathers to actively participate in child-rearing with an aggressive slogan: "A man, who does not take care of his child, is not called a father" (育児をしない男を、父とは呼ばない) (MHW, n.d.-a). The man featured in this poster is a dancer and the husband of one of the most popular Japanese singers, Namie

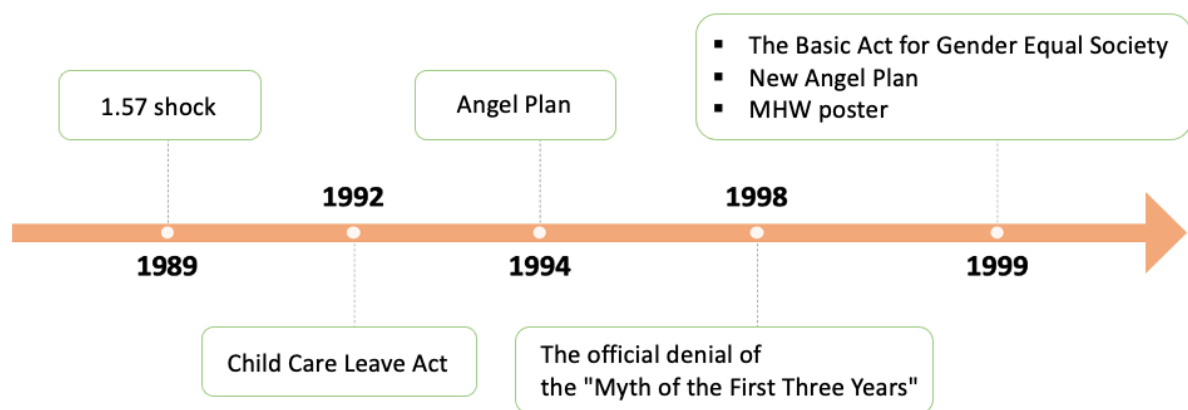
Figure 9 - Ministry of Health and Welfare poster



Amuro. In this way, MHW promoted fathers' parenting by using prominent figures to attract public awareness.

After the 1.57 shock in 1989, the lowest fertility rate ever, the Japanese government introduced a series of policies in the 1990s that aimed to create a more equal parenting environment both for mothers and fathers. It is evident that the Japanese government leveraged gender equality approaches to counter the declining birthrate during this decade.

Figure 10 - The government's policies from 1989 to 1999



While this poster succeeded in drawing Japanese people's attention by employing a husband of a celebrity couple at the time, it also had social ramifications by evoking frustration among fathers with the government for implementing a series of new policies without addressing the current situation, such as men's unpaid overwork and few parental leave, which inevitably made men's participation in child-rearing difficult. In May of the same year, another

poster by the Child Care Hours for Men and Women Network (*Ikujiren*, 育時連) highlighted the heart-rending cries of the fathers by responding to the earlier slogan by MHW. This poster asserts, “A man, who does not take care of his child, is not called a father? Then, let me take care of my child without worry!” (*Ikujiren*, n.d.). Indeed, the slogan of MHW gave the impression that it

Figure 11 - *Ikujiren* poster



blamed the lack of fathers’ awareness of child-rearing. In other words, the most important part, that being the causes that keep fathers from child-rearing, was missing.

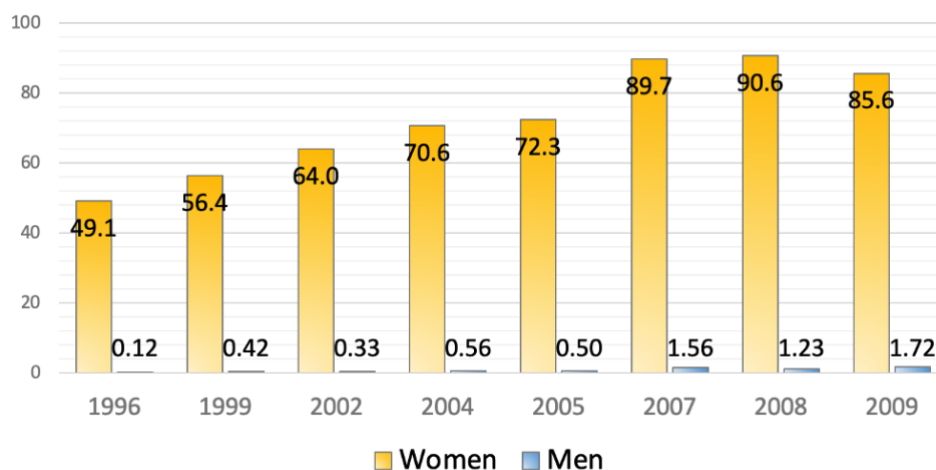
As their name implies, *Ikujiren* is an advocacy group that insists on equal parenting time and responsibilities for both men and women. This group challenges the structural gender binary, whereby fathers cannot have sufficient time to spend time with their children and engage in parenting responsibilities, as described at the bottom of the poster:

We are not raising our children for the government’s countermeasure of a declining birthrate. We are raising children because we want to spend quality time with our little

ones, for which we are responsible. At the same time, we want to work as a member of society as a matter of course. We want a society where people can genuinely balance parenting and working. We have family and social responsibilities. Also, we have the right to work and spend time with family. Why don't we aim for a society where people can fulfill their responsibilities and rights? We created this group to convey these feelings (Translated from *Ikujiren*, n.d.).

The data on the childcare leave acquisition rate from 1996, after Childcare Leave Act and Angel Plan were launched, clearly indicates what issues remained unaddressed.

Figure 12 - Childcare leave acquisition rate, 1996-2009



(Data adapted from MHLW, 2022a)

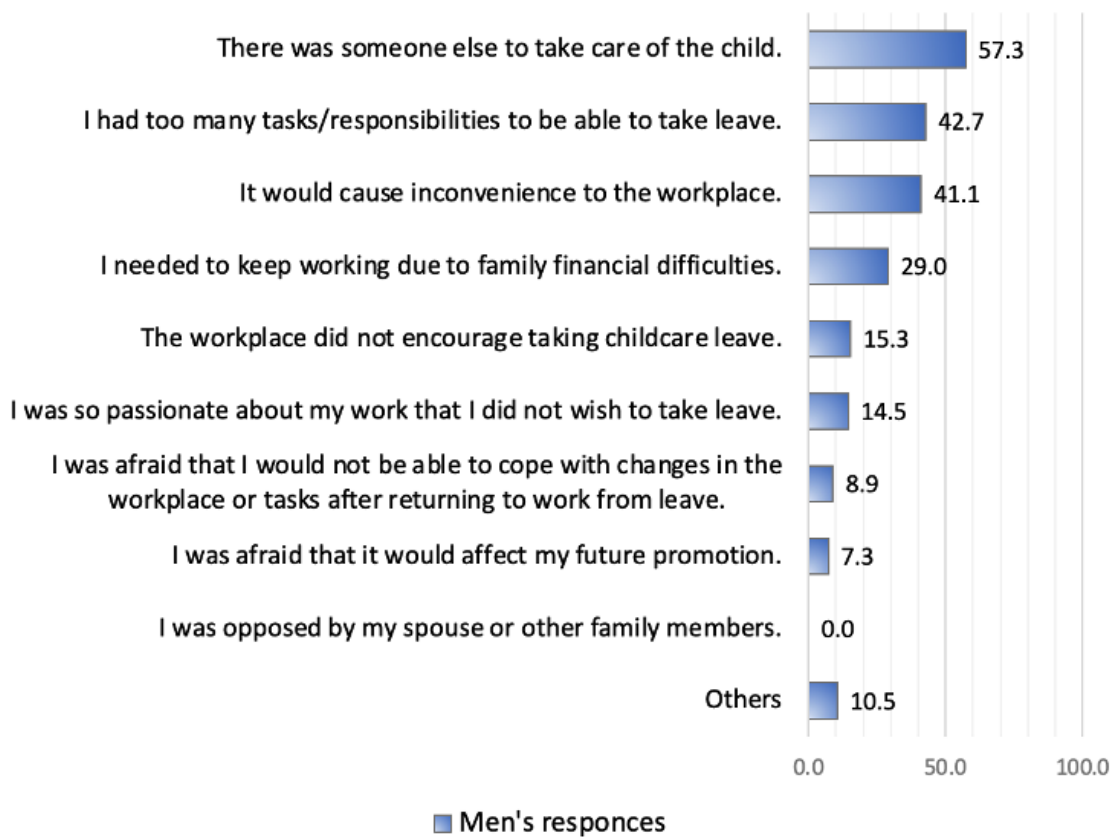
While the childcare leave acquisition rate has gradually increased, there has been a significant gender gap. Men's childcare leave acquisition rate indicates less than one percent until 2007.

Although the government set a target for men's childcare leave acquisition rate to be 10% in 2002, the data in 2009 indicates that this acquisition rate was still less than one-fifth of their target. Given the childcare leave acquisition rate from 1999 to 2009, it is clear that the road to

the government's goal of achieving gender equality in parenting was going to be years in the making.

The low rate of men's childcare leave acquisition does not mean that fathers had no desire to participate in child-rearing. The following data published in 2003 provides several reasons why men did not take childcare leave, even though they were entitled to it.

Figure 13 - Reasons for not taking childcare leave despite having rights



(Data adapted and translated from MHLW, 2005)

The most common reason for men's low childcare leave acquisition rate was that there was someone else to take care of their children. Given the tremendous gender gap in the childcare acquisition rate mentioned earlier, most men chose not to take parental leave as their female

spouses took the leave. Other reasons given by over 40% of the respondents concern the work environment. For example, they had too many work tasks and responsibilities to take leaves, or they thought it would cause inconvenience to the workplace. The problem here was that the companies failed to provide institutional support for their employees to take leave. Thus, what made it difficult for men to be equally involved in childcare was not only a lack of awareness of childcare but also a lack of accessibility to childcare leave. The idea of gendered division of labour, men as breadwinners and women as child caretakers, is still ingrained in the Japanese work culture. Introducing the new plan did not necessarily induce immediate changes to gendered practices or culture. This survey, conducted four years after the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society was launched, highlights that there was little change in the gendered conception that women have primary responsibility for domestic work, including child-rearing.

An active movement toward reversing the declining birth rate has been evidenced since 1989, with the implementation of the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society and the New Angel Plan. However, various difficulties emerged to obstruct improving gender equality in parenting. The research on childcare leave and the two posters about men's participation in parenting demonstrates how the public was at a loss between the government's drastically changed direction and the reality where the rigid gender norm remained. The government's new direction on gender-equal parenting resulted in illuminating the gender norms that are deeply ingrained in Japanese society.

4.4 *Ikumen*: campaigns for fathers' active participation in child-rearing

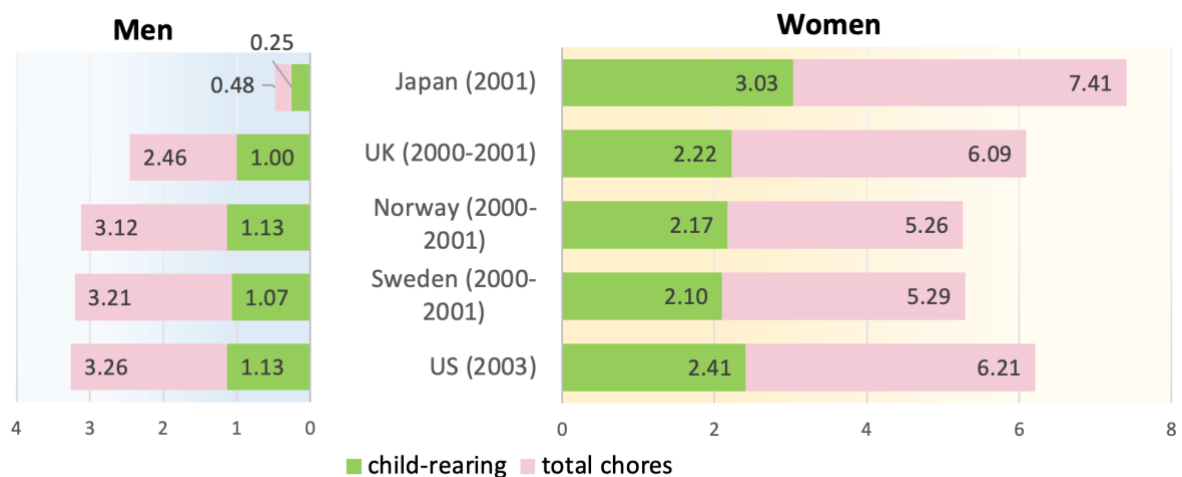
Although the prevailing child-rearing theory was debunked and became a myth, the trend of mothers' primary responsible in parenting and fathers' breadwinner model has never disappeared from Japanese society. This lingering gender norm hindered the Japanese government's new vision of a society where both mothers and fathers cooperate in child-rearing. Several new policies to promote gender-equal parenting and encounter the declining birth rate failed to transform former gender practices; rather, these policies highlighted the gender issues deeply rooted in Japanese society.

While MHW's 1999 poster which negatively pointed out fathers' low involvement in parenting drew criticism, the government's new plan positively promoted fathers' active parenting. In June 2010, MHLW (formed through the merger of MHW and the Ministry of Labor and Welfare in 2001) started the *Ikumen* Project designed to raise awareness of the value of men's involvement in child-rearing. The term *ikumen* (*ikuji*; child-rearing + men) is a neologism that refers to "men who participate in child-rearing" (Kotobank, n.d.). The *Ikumen* Project is intended to encourage fathers to be "men who enjoy child-rearing and grow themselves as well" (MHLW, n.d.). Ultimately, this campaign aims to boost gender equality in parenting by conveying positive images of men who actively and voluntarily participate in caregiving responsibilities.

Compared to other countries, Japanese men spend far less time engaged in childcare

than women. The following graph shows the time spent on housework by men and women with children under the age of six from 2001 to 2003.

Figure 14 - Time spent on domestic responsibilities



(Data adapted from MHLW, 2005)

The graph shows that, while Japanese women spent more time on housework than those in other countries, Japanese men spent a total of 48 minutes per day on housework and only 25 minutes on childcare alone. In order to improve this situation, the *Ikumen* Project set a target of 150 minutes in 2020 (MHLW, n.d.).

After this project started, the term *ikumen* became widely known in Japan. For example, people use this term to praise a father who does a good job in child-rearing: “your husband is such an *ikumen!*” Consequently, in December 2010, the term *ikumen* ranked in the top 10 of You-Can New and Trendy Words Awards (*Jiyukokuminsha*, n.d.). In 2011, the Japan Anniversary Association set October 19th as *Ikumen* Day, and on that day, the *Ikumen* Project gives the annual award *Ikumen of the Year* to celebrities who worked hard and enjoyed

parenting at the same time. Furthermore, in 2013 and 2014, this project also started the annual *Ikumen* Company Award for companies that supported their *ikumen* employees and the *Ikuboss* (*ikuji*; child-rearing + boss) Award for bosses who supported their *ikumen* subordinates. In this way, the term “*ikumen*” gained significant attention as a new trend in the scene of Japanese child-rearing.

Figure 15 - *Ikumen* of the Year in 2021

Prize winners in 2021 include Makidai from the popular singing group EXILE, TV personality Joy, and baseball player Alex Ramirez.



(Figure from *Ikumen* Project website)

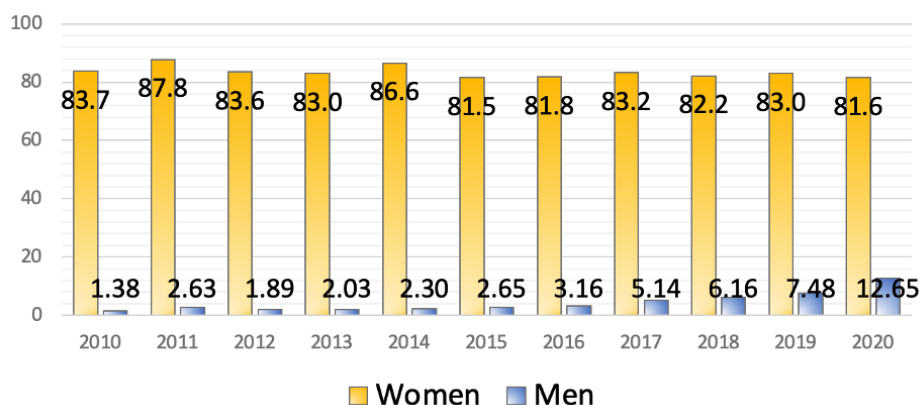
<http://ikumen-of-the-year.com/2021.html>

Given that the Japanese government failed to achieve a target of 10% for men’s childcare acquisition rate, with a rate of only 1.72% in 2009, one of the *Ikumen* Project’s goals is to normalize men’s childcare leave in all work environments (MHLW, n.d.). The government promoted a work-life balance with the current goal of men’s childcare leave acquisition rate to

13% by 2020 and 30% by 2025 (MHLW, n.d.; Cabinet Office, 2017). As part of the promotion, MHLW created the *Ikumen* Project website (<https://ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp/>) to present case studies, materials, and videos of companies that actively provide men’s childcare leave. Also, the project publishes stories of men’s child-rearing experiences, along with organizing seminars and other activities related to male child-rearing and conducts activities in cooperation with participating companies (MHLW, n.d.). Thus, the *Ikumen* project emphasizes promoting men’s childcare leave, with specific numerical targets by the government and in cooperation with companies.

I now explore how the *Ikumen* project improved men’s childcare leave acquisition rate and what issues remained unsolved, using data on childcare leave acquisition rate after 2010.

Figure 16 - Childcare leave acquisition rate, 2010-2020



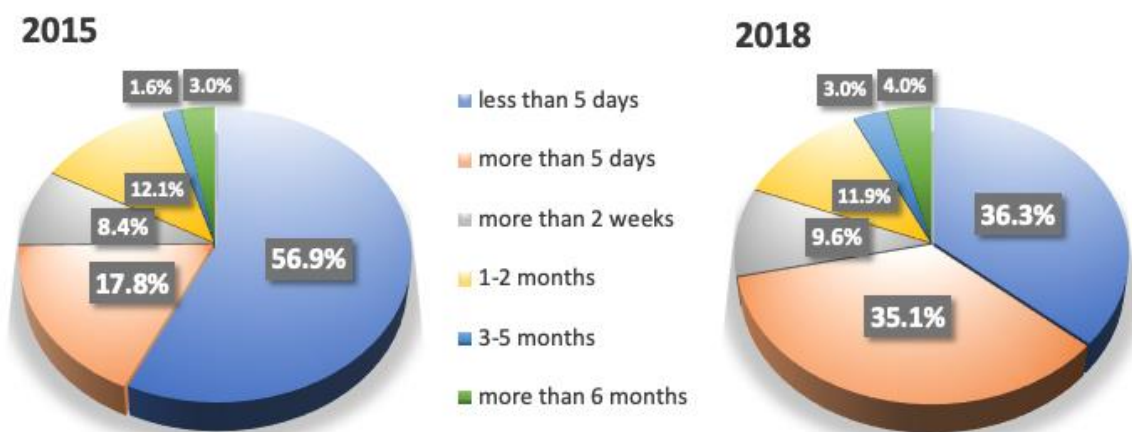
(Data adapted from MHLW, 2021)

The latest data provided by MHLW (2021) indicates that men’s childcare leave acquisition rate in 2020 jumped to 12.65%, the highest record ever. Comparing the 12.65% rate in 2020, the

1.38% rate in 2010 when the *Ikumen* Project started, is indeed a tremendous leap. Furthermore, while this number is less than a quarter of the 81.6% rate of women accessing childcare leave, this is an astounding 30-fold increase from the 0.42% rate in 1999 when the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society and Angel Plan were launched. Although it fell short of the government’s goal of 13% by 2020, it was up by 5.17% from the previous year, crossing the 10% barrier for the first time. MHLW predicts that this figure will accelerate in the future.

Despite these increased rates of acquisition, the data on the actual length of men’s childcare leave belies the continuing problem of gender inequality in parenting. The following charts indicate how long male employees took childcare leave in 2015 and 2018.

Figure 17 - Breakdown of men’s childcare leave in 2015 and 2018



(Data adapted from MHLW, 2022b)

As the data shows, nearly 57% of men accessing childcare leave took fewer than five days of the leave in 2015. While the leave acquisition rate itself has more than doubled in three years, 36% still took fewer than five days and 35% took fewer than two weeks of childcare leave in

2018. Even the latest data of 2020 indicates that 28.33% of men took less than five days of childcare leave, despite the highest ever leave acquisition rate (MHLW, 2021). An employment website, Indeed, published a poster questioning the nominal childcare leave for men in Japan: “Men’s parenting leave is shorter than Golden Week (Japan’s holiday from late April to early May).” The cartoon includes an ironic line criticizing the five-day leave as being so short that it cannot cultivate even white radish sprouts, plants known to grow quickly.

Figure 18 - “Men’s parenting leave is shorter than Golden Week”



(From website by Indeed, n.d.)

<https://jp.indeed.com/%E3%82%B5%E3%83%BC%E3%83%81%E3%81%82%E3%82%8C/gender-equity/korede-iinoka>

This cartoon accurately reflects the reality of men’s childcare leave in Japan. The vast majority of men take only about five days to two weeks of childcare leave, and yet, men who have taken leave and their companies who have allowed them to do so showered with praise. *Sankei News*, an online version of the Japanese newspaper, mocked this situation by stating

childcare leave exists “name-only” (*Sankei News*, 2019). The Japanese government has focused merely on improving the childcare acquisition rate through the *Ikumen* Project, while it has failed to create substantial change to gendered parenting practices.

In addition, public opinion has been harsh toward the term *ikumen*. In a survey conducted by *Asahi Shimbun* in 2019, 68.7% of the respondents complained that only men’s childcare is given special treatment. *Ikumen* are praised if they engage in the following routines: going grocery shopping with their babies in strollers or taking their children to and from daycare or school. As some of the respondents in the survey argues, women are not praised if they do the same tasks, and there is no such special name for women as “*iku-women*,” either. They are just “mothers” doing their jobs, parenting.

The fact that men’s active parenting is given credit illustrates Japan’s unique culture, reflecting dominant gender norms and practices normalize women’s caring labour. The following post on Twitter, a conversation between a Japanese worker and his American colleague, captures the uniqueness of the Japanese concept “*ikumen*.”

Japanese worker: How do you say “*ikumen*” in English?

American colleague: What’s an *ikumen*?

Japanese worker: A father involved in child-rearing.

American colleague: In that case, it’s just a “dad” in English.

Chouna, (2015, December 9). Content of tweet.

Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/chounamoul/status/674577343936000000>

As this conversation illustrates, no matter how a man actively takes care of his own children, he is nothing more than a father. The term *ikumen* made a father's childcare special, rather than normal. There is no doubt that the *Ikumen* Project has effectively attracted the public's attention to the term *ikumen* and the need for men to participate in child-rearing. However, there is no denying that this project has lost sight of the essentials at the same time. By giving special credit to fathers who were involved in parenting, the government's *Ikumen* Project ironically reinforced gender stereotypes and failed to normalize fathers' parenting.

Thus, although the Japanese government has actively enhanced fathers' child-rearing, it has failed to standardize this new practice in society. The gender role that Japan had worked to establish from the 1960s to the 1980s under the slogan "men go to work, women stay at home" remains in people's understanding. Along with the concept of motherhood, the gender norm of women's primary caregiving labour has deeply embedded in Japanese society. As a result, the idea that parenting is women's natural role made men's active parenting appear *unnatural*, and thus deserving of praise. It is apparent that Japan will not be able to realize true gender-equal parenting unless fathers' child-rearing is taken for granted without any special credit.

In this way, the clear gender role that the Japanese government had worked to build up from the 1960s to the 1980s to promote "men go to work, women stay at home" deeply remains in people's understanding that child-rearing is a mother's role. Accordingly, while it is

considered *unnatural* for mothers not to devote themselves to child-rearing, it is special for fathers to take care of their children. This lingering impact of gender norms hinders the realization of true gender-equal parenting in Japan.

In the next chapter, I will explore the experiences of four Japanese working mothers, focusing on how prevailing gender ideas and practices impacted their experiences in parenting and beliefs in motherhood. Their experiences will also illuminate how the Japanese government's series of new policies after the 1990s have affected gender norms at home and in the workplace.

Chapter 5: Japanese Working Mothers' Parenting Experiences

In the previous chapter, I examined the changing discussions about parenting practices between the 1990s and the 2020s in Japan. Japan's declining birth rate since the late 1980s led the Japanese government to shift its approach to welfare policies from encouraging wives to stay at home to supporting them in balancing working and parenting. The government actively promoted several plans to enhance parental support not only to alleviate the double burden on working mothers but also to encourage active parenting by fathers. However, as the previous chapter revealed, the government's plans had some drawbacks and limitations in terms of perpetuating gender inequality. For example, despite the government's success in boosting men's childcare leave, 70% of men's leave was less than two weeks, and nearly 40% of them were less than five days. In addition, the neologism "*ikumen*" ironically revealed the patriarchal understanding of parenting by giving special credit to fathers participating in child-rearing labour rather than normalizing gender-equal parenting. These latest discussions around parenting illustrate how gender inequality in parenting is pervasive in Japan.

In this chapter, I explore the actual Japanese parenting experiences based on my interviews with four working mothers in Japan. The interviewees from different generations will give us a glimpse of how child-rearing practices and norms evolved over time in Japan. I first explore how the "Myth of the First Three Years" impacted Japanese working mothers' child-rearing experiences. I then analyze their husbands' childcare participation in relation to

changing parenting trends, as examined in the previous chapter.

5.1 Responses from working mothers in Japan

I conducted interviews with four working mothers who had experience raising children in Japan. In this section, I first explore conversations with two interviewees who gave birth before 2000. Interviewee A gave birth to her child in 1983 when the parenting belief in the necessity of maternal love for child development was widespread and unchallenged. Interviewee B had her child in 1999, right after the Japanese government officially debunked the “Myth of the First Three Years” in *Kōsei Hakusho* in 1998. Next, I explore conversations with two other interviewees who had children after 2010, when the government launched the *Ikumen* Project and encouraged fathers to actively engage in child-rearing. Comparing the two generations will clarify how the “Myth of the First Three Years” and more broadly, changing social discussions around gender roles in parenting, has informed people’s parenting experiences. The following table indicates the year of their childbirth, the length of their husbands’ childcare leave, and working hours for their paid jobs.

Table 2 - The information of the four interviewees

Interviewee	Year of childbirth	Husband's childcare leave	Working hour	Geographic area
A	1983	NA (single mother)	part-time	Hokkaido
B	1999	No	part-time	Hokkaido
C	2014	1 week	full-time	Tokyo
	2017	1 week		
D	2020	1 month	full-time	Hokkaido

5.1.1 Child-rearing experiences (The late 1980s-late 1990s)

Interviewee A has an adult child who is in her late 30s. When she had a baby in 1983, the common belief based on the child development theory prevailed and influenced people's perceptions about the importance of mother-centred parenting. As she became a single mother in 1986, Interviewee A chose to live with her parents to raise her child. She stayed with her child as a full-time mother when her child was an infant. Once her child turned three years of age, she started a part-time job and sent her child to pre-school. When asked why she chose to stay with her child until her child turned three years old even though her parents were available to support her with childcare, Interviewee A answered, "I believed that mothers had to stay with their children when the children were still young. At that time (the early 1980s), childcare facilities were not well developed, and everyone around me was doing the same. I thought this (being a stay-at-home mother) was the most *natural* way of child-rearing."

As seen in Chapter 3, Japanese-style welfare society that the Japanese government introduced in the 1980s aimed to reduce public expenditure. Through this plan, the government expected full-time housewives to engage in domestic work including childcare and elderly care to reduce public expenditure for welfare programs. At the same time, many parenting books emphasized the importance of dedicated care up to children's three years of age by reinvent the proverb, *mitsugo no tamashii hyakumade*. As a result, the idea of "until three years of age, by mother's hands" was deeply ingrained in Japan in the 1980s. Interviewee A was one of the

many mothers who took for granted mothers' full-time caregiving roles. It is clear that it was uncommon for mothers to put their children in daycare and go to work in the 1980s.

In 1999, the year when the Japanese government implemented the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society and the New Angel Plan were implemented, Interviewee B quit her job to give birth to her child. I asked Interviewee B about finding a job after having a baby.

Me: Did you find a new job after having a baby?

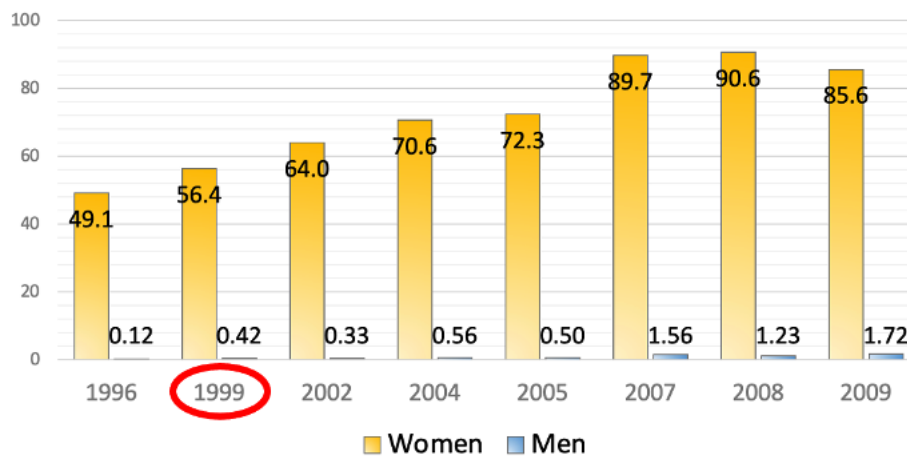
Interviewee B: Yes, but I waited until my child turned three years old.

Me: Why three years old?

Interviewee B: I just thought that I had to be with my child until she turned three.

Like Interviewee A, Interviewee B's response suggests that she believed that the first three years were critical for child development. Even though the Child Care Leave Act started in 1992, seven years before she had a child, she left her job to stay with her child during this supposedly crucial period. Drawing back to the childcare leave acquisition rate in 1999, only 56.4% of women took parental leave without quitting their jobs. As in the case of Interviewee B, nearly half of the women resigned from their jobs instead of taking maternity leave. The graph below shows childcare leave acquisition rate that includes the data of 1999 when Interviewee B resigned her job, instead of taking childcare leave. The data and Interviewee B's response indicate that childcare leave was not the norm in the workplace in Japan for either women or men.

Figure 19 - Childcare leave acquisition rate in 1999



(Data adapted from (MHLW, 2022b))

In her response to my question about the age of three, Interviewee B also states,

There were two major key phrases for child-rearing, “*mitsugo no tamashii hyakumade*” and the “Myth of the First Three Years” in those days. These were not something I was taught or forced by anyone. I just knew the first three years of a child were important and believed this idea was a standard for child-rearing. My mother-in-law also urged this idea to convince me, but I had already known it.

Her response suggests that the two key concepts for child-rearing seen in the previous chapters were deeply rooted in the beliefs of mothers, even though the “Myth of the First Three Years” was officially denied by the Japanese government the year before Interviewee B gave birth. In 1998 *Kōsei Hakusho*, the government indicated that effective childcare is not based on the length of time a mother and a child spend together but on the quality of love by all the caretakers, including a father. However, Interviewee B believed in the theory on the importance of maternal care during the first three years of a

child's life instead of dismissing it as a myth. As discussed in Chapter 4, the national survey done in 1998 indicates approximately 90% of respondents agreed that "mothers should concentrate on childcare until their children turn around three years old." Interviewee B's story explains how people value three years of age and maternal love. Consequently, her story illustrates how the government's official denial had little impact on the widespread beliefs in the child-rearing theory.

Furthermore, Interviewee B shared an anecdote about her mother-in-law's experience, which suggests the necessity of a mother-child bond strongly impacted people's beliefs about parenting. Her mother-in-law told Interviewee B that "when my child (Interviewee B's husband) was small, I was busy running my family business and left him with his grandparents. Then he became so mentally unstable that he got into a bad habit of biting his nails." The idea that leaving the toddler with his grandparents created such instability that he bit his nails reflects the concept of maternal deprivation seen in Chapter 3, which is the theory that the absence of a mother affects children's healthy development. Her mother-in-law linked the mother's absence to the son's bad habit of biting his nails because she believed that the lack of a mother-child bond negatively affected the child's mental stability. Because Interviewee B gave birth in 1999 at the age of 20, her mother-in-law likely experienced child-rearing in the 1970s and the 1980s. The mother-in-law's story illustrates that the parenting strongly affected parenting

in her generation, and furthermore, how the child-rearing theory was passed down orally to the next generation as critical parenting knowledge.

While Interviewee B quit her job and raised a child, her husband was too busy working in the service industry to take any childcare leave. She recalled that there were almost no men around her who took childcare leave. As reviewed earlier, men's childcare acquisition rate in 1999 was only 0.42%. There is no doubt that her husband barely had choice to take childcare leave just as other male employees did. Her husband's experience suggests that gender norms still clearly divided couples' roles in the 1990s: women's role as primary caregivers and men's role as sole breadwinners.

In the 1990s, Japan went through many changes in parenting conceptions. The Japanese government implemented Child Care Leave Act, Angel Plan, Basic Act for Gender Equal Society, and New Angel Plan over the decade. Moreover, in 1998, the government officially debunked the "Myth of the First Three Years" to free mothers from the burden of the gender norm that positioned them as primary caregivers. The narrative of Interviewee B, who had a child in 1999, gives us a glimpse into Japanese parenting in the context of changing welfare policies. Her stories reveal that policy changes regarding childcare at a government level alone did not lead to the improvement of gender equality in parenting responsibilities in families; gendered practices in child-rearing remained, and the "Myth of the First Three Years" still influences people's beliefs in parenting.

5.1.2 Child-rearing experiences (2010s-)

Next, I explore the experiences of Interviewees C and D, who have been working mothers since the 2010s. As seen in Chapter 4, this was the period when the Japanese government promoted men's active participation in parenting, especially setting a clear goal of increasing men's childcare leave. This section will examine if the promotion of the *Ikumen* Project contributed to making parenting responsibilities equal, negating the impact of the "Myth of the First Three Years" since the 2010s.

Interviewee C is a mother raising two children born in 2014 and 2017. She took childcare leave and returned to the same workplace when each of her children turned one. Interviewee C was concerned about sending her children to daycare at a young age because her own mother was a full-time housewife who spent all day with her until she started pre-school at the age of three. However, many women in her workplace returned to work one to two years after giving birth. Therefore, Interviewee C decided to work reduced hours when her older child turned one year old, as did other female colleagues.

Interviewee C's workplace, where many mothers return to work, even before their children turn three years of age, appears to provide a progressive working environment in terms of gender-inclusive workplace as opposed to the patriarchal tendency in Japanese work culture. However, Interviewee C shared the types of challenges that working mothers face and the pervasiveness of gender inequality in her workplace:

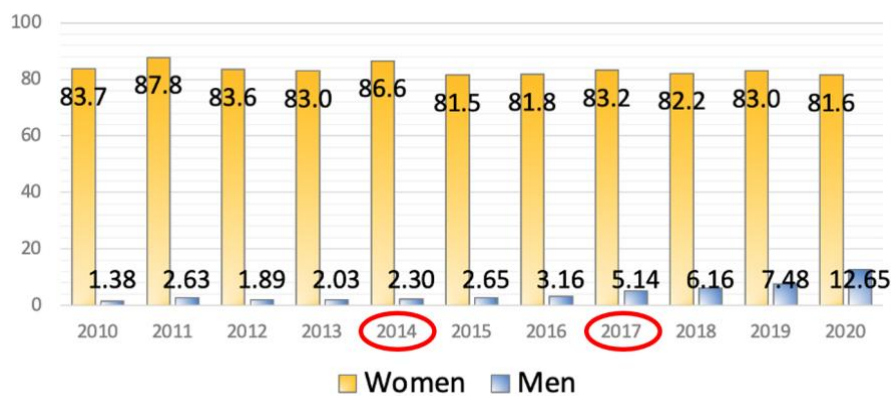
Most female employees who return to their job want to transfer to another department with fewer overtime hours or another position with less responsibility. This is because they need to reduce their workload to take care of their children. Working mothers must leave the office early when they receive an unexpected call from daycare due to their children's illness. They cannot work overtime as they need to pick up their children, stop by a grocery store on their way home, and do chores such as cooking and laundry after arriving home. On the other hand, male employees seek promotion to other positions, such as managers, that offer better compensation due to their increase of family members. These positions require more responsibilities and overtime and make it harder for them to have enough time to participate in housework. In this way, even if both a husband and a wife work, the wife inevitably spends more time on child-rearing and chores than the husband.

Her response highlights gender inequality in the Japanese workplace and the household. Even if both women and men are working parents, they do not have equal responsibilities in the workplace and at home. The following information by (Teikoku Data Bank, 2015) clearly illustrates this unbalanced allocation in the Japanese workplace: the average percentage of women in management positions in Japanese companies is only 6.4%, and more than 50% of companies have no female managers. The gender role is still based on "men go to work, women go to work and do housework," and thus male employees seek promotion for higher salaries, while female workers choose to limit their workload in their workplace to perform gender roles at home. As seen earlier, the issue of gender division of labour lies not only in men's lack of

awareness of sharing domestic work but also in the patriarchal work culture and social norms whereby women’s care responsibilities are taken for granted.

While men’s access to childcare leave in the 2010s was still around two to eight percent, Interviewee C’s husband was able to take childcare leave in 2014 and 2017. He was one of the few men who was able to take childcare leave, as shown in the childcare leave acquisition rates for 2014 and 2017 below.

Figure 20 - Childcare leave acquisition rate in 2014 and 2017

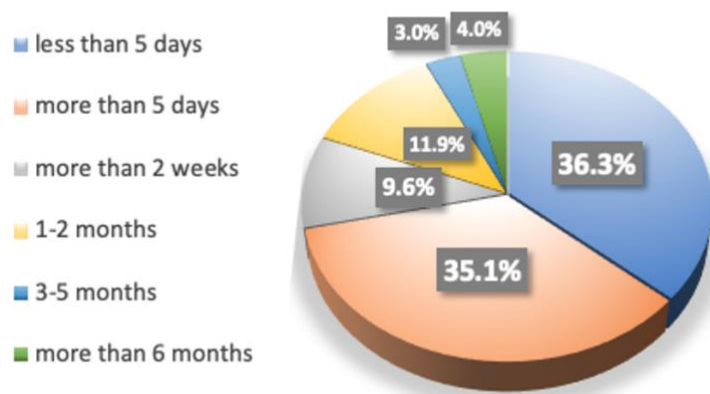


(Data adapted from MHLW, 2021)

However, he took leave for only one week each time, even though his company promoted male employees’ childcare leave, influenced by the *Ikumen* Project started in 2010. According to Interviewee C, her husband “read the room” and hesitated to take longer than a week. His response to peer pressure exemplifies Japan’s work culture. Since he did not want to cause any inconvenience to other colleagues and expected that other male employees would take short childcare leaves, he followed what the majority deemed appropriate. His choice to take only

one week’s leave to avoid burdening coworkers reminds us of the timely issue about the length of male childcare leave, as seen in Chapter 4. While the men’s childcare leave acquisition rate drastically increased in the past decade after the *Ikumen* Project started in 2010, the data from 2018 indicates that about three-quarters of men took fewer than two weeks of childcare leave, and nearly 37% of them took less than five days (MHLW, 2021).

Figure 21 - Breakdown of men’s childcare leave in 2018



(Data adapted from MHLW, 2022b)

The experience of Interviewee C’s husband precisely illustrates how the male childcare leave policy remains nominal. His response revealed that the Japanese work culture impacted by the gender division of labour has not caught up with the promotion of men’s active parenting. As seen in Chapter 4, the government’s goal of boosting the childcare leave acquisition rate has resulted in creating “name-only” leave, rather than taking meaningful leave that allows fathers to focus on parenting for granted.

Interviewee C’s experience demonstrates that the gendered notion underlying the

“Myth of the First Three Years,” that is, child-rearing is the natural role of women, has continued to affect today’s Japanese mothers at home and at work. While more women have a choice to take childcare leave and return to the same workplace as working mothers, they have not been liberated from unequal parenting and domestic responsibilities. Accordingly, women’s main responsibility in household labour creates inequalities in their workloads and promotions at work. In addition, the gender norm of women’s primary role as caregivers prevents the normalization of men’s parenting, thus minimizing male employees’ childcare leave. Even though the impositions of the “Myth of the First Three Years” have faded compared to before the 2000s, no significant change has been made in the distribution of parenting responsibilities and workplace culture in Japan.

Lastly, I examine the experience of Interviewee D, who was taking childcare leave to raise a one-year-old when the interview was conducted in 2021. I first asked her if she knew about the “Myth of the First Three Years.” She answered, “Yes, I know about this myth because I frequently see this term on the internet and in the titles of parenting books. Also, I often see controversies about this belief in online forums among mothers.” Interviewee D’s response indicates that she does not recognize the “Myth of the First Three Years” as something to believe or must follow, but rather as a topic that she has seen or heard somewhere.

Although Interviewee D knew that the phrase “Myth of the First Three Years” caused a dilemma for working mothers, she is not affected by this myth in deciding on her return to

work. She shared her opinion about becoming a working mother:

I'm planning to return to work as soon as my childcare leave ends. In fact, I would like to stay with my child a little longer if I could. But it's not because I feel sorry for him or believe the negative effect of putting him in daycare before three years of age. I think the "Myth of the First Three Years" is an outdated idea. I want to stay with my child because I just want to watch his growth myself.

Interviewee D does not blindly follow the parenting practice based on the "Myth of the First Three Years" but critically observes the necessity of mother-child bonding during the first three years of age.

While Interviewee D was taking childcare leave for one year, her husband, who works for an IT company, also took childcare leave for a month. Moreover, after his childcare leave ended, his company gave him a choice to continue working from home because of the Covid-19 pandemic. He decided to continue remote work, which is different from the typical work arrangement of Japanese companies. Interviewee D explains that her husband's remote work enables him to take care of the child during his break and greatly helps her handle other household chores. Her husband also expresses his pleasure in being able to spend more time with his child. Clearly, Interviewee D is not affected by the "Myth of the First Three Years," and her husband's company offers benefits to male employees with young children. Interviewee D's rejection of the myth and her husband's decision to work from home suggest that, for some, the prevailing parenting belief based on the myth is obsolete in the 2020s.

However, the phrase “until three years old” is still widely used in a title of parenting magazines and early childhood education books. The following table shows seven parenting books that were published between 2011 to 2020 and have “three years old” in the titles.

Table 3 - Parenting books with “three years old” in the title

Year	Title	English translation
2011	3歳までにやっておきたい育児法ベスト30	The best 30 child-rearing methods you should try before the age of three
2013	3歳までの子育てに大切なたった5つのこと	The 5 most important things you can do to raise your child before the age of three
2013	人生の基盤は妊娠中から3歳までに決まる—人生でいちばん大切な3歳までの育て方	The foundation of a child's life is determined from pregnancy to the age of three : How to raise a child until the age of three , the most important age in life
2018	3歳までのかわいがり子育て	Cuddly Parenting until the Age of Three
2019	子どもの人生は「腸」で決まる—3歳までにやっておきたい最強の免疫力の育て方	Child's Life is Determined by the Intestines - How to Develop the Strongest Immune System by Age of Three
2019	3歳までに絶対やるべき幼児教育—頭のいい子に育てる	Pre-school education that you must do by the age of three : Raising a smart child
2020	東大卒ママたちに教わる、「東大脳」を育てる3歳までの習慣	How to Raise a Brain for Tokyo University by Age 3

The contemporary child-rearing instruction books in the table above indicate how a child’s life until the age of three is important for children’s education or health. Moreover, Ibuka’s best-selling parenting book discussed in Chapter 3, *Kindergarten is Too Late* (幼稚園からでは遅すぎる, 1971), is still popular and has been reprinted many times (Sunmark Publishing, n.d.). The main argument of this book, that early education before the age of three is essential for children’s development, has continued to provide guidance for parents in raising children. It is apparent that the importance of early education before the age of three is still dominant and popular in Japanese parenting books.

The phrase “three years old” also appears as a marker for the minimum age that children need to be for parents to qualify for subsidized childcare. In October 2019, the Japanese government launched a policy that waives childcare fees to make it easier for mothers to return to work (Cabinet Office, n.d.). Although all preschool-aged children are eligible for this free-of-charge program, the costs of daycare for children under three years old are based on parents’ income with strict restrictions. (MHLW, 2018). This age boundary of three years of age highlights the government’s assumption that one of the parents typically takes care of younger children at home unless the parents are in special circumstances. Although the government does not provide any explanation of the specific reason for the age restrictions, it is highly probable that the idea of “until the age of three, by mothers’ hands” underlie its childcare policy. In this way, the phrase “three years old” still serves as a marker for normalizing mothers’ roles in taking care of children up to three years old.

The idea that children under the age of three should stay at home with their mothers often leads to different reactions to children who have attended pre-school and those who have attended daycare. Pre-school (*yōchien*, 幼稚園) is an educational institution where children over three years old attend before entering elementary school, and it falls under the jurisdiction of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Pre-schools normally offer four hours of instructional time per day, from morning to afternoon (Benesse, n.d.). Meanwhile, daycare (*hoikuen*, 保育園) is a care facility for all pre-school aged children (zero to six years

old) whose parents go to work. Daycare is under the control of MHLW, and their schedule is longer than pre-school; regular opening hours for public daycares are from 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM, but some of them provide extended care until 8:00 PM or later for parents working night shifts (City of Sapporo, n.d.). Differences in the purpose and the length of care time generate the following misconceptions: Children from pre-school are more intelligent than those from daycare, or children in daycare are emotionally unstable because of a lack of attachment with their mothers (Suzuki, 2020). The different views on pre-school and childcare suggest how the gender norm of mothers' role, which defines that they should take care of their young children at home, continues to impact people's conception of a child's proper development.

Accordingly, the common conception that daycare children are disadvantaged pressures working mothers. For example, one working mother explains that her mother-in-law challenged her by saying, "Leaving your child at daycare and going to work is neglect" (Kawai, 2021). Moreover, in one mothers' online forum, about 40% of the mothers still completely or somewhat agree that mothers should not put their children to daycare at a young age, pointing to the lack of a mother-child bond or mental stability (Hina, 2021). It is evident that these people believe the prevailing gendered belief that mothers with young children should stay at home and be responsible for childcare. In this way, the "Myth of the First Three Years" still imposes the gender norm of women's caregiving role, and thus places pressure and guilt on working mothers.

While Interviewee D describes that her husband's remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic has helped her share childcare responsibilities, an increase in husbands' time at home does not necessarily ensure an equal division of domestic roles among couples. Rather, gender inequality in domestic labour became more pronounced during the pandemic. Ochiai and Suzuki's (2020) survey on the distribution of domestic work during the pandemic suggests that housework remained a women's role, even when they spend the same amount of time at home as their husbands. For example, one mother responded, "My husband and two children are at home all day long under the stay-at-home order. I have no time to rest because I have to feed them, including every meal and snack, and clean up." Another response reveals that only the husband's work was prioritized, even though both a husband and a wife worked from home: "My husband concentrates on his work in his own room. However, I cannot focus on my work at all because I also need to take care of my child while I work." These responses suggest that equal time spent at home does not directly translate into equal responsibility for household labour. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that gender norms continue to affect the division of housework and parenting practices between women and men, regardless of whether or not both of them work from home.

In protest against the prevailing gender inequality in domestic responsibilities, Kureha, a Japanese manufacturer of household goods, released the TV commercial with an innovative message, "I don't help." The following screenshots of Kureha's plastic wrap commercial aired

in July 2020 illustrate its messages for gender-equal household labour. Figure 22 shows a husband cleaning up his family’s dinner by himself. In addition, Figure 23 depicts the husband falling asleep while reading a bedtime story to his child.

Figure 22 - Kureha CM 1



“I don’t help.”

Figure 23 - Kureha CM 2



“The pattern of family and the style of work have changed.
We should be able to change ourselves, too.”

(Figures adapted by Wada, 2020)

As the message in Figure 22 indicates, in Japan, a wife is primarily responsible for housework, and a husband is merely in an assisting position. Therefore, men’s performance of such tasks is usually described as “help.” Kureha’s commercial challenges this gender norm

and conveys that husbands should voluntarily “do” the domestic work. As the commercial proceeds to claim that, since the family composition and work styles have changed over the years, these gender roles and awareness in the family also need to change. Kureha’s 2021 commercial exposed the gender stereotype about domestic responsibilities and delivered a groundbreaking message to families in contemporary Japan.

The examination of Interviewee D’s response reveals that, although the impact of the myth has slowly faded away from contemporary parenting practices, the gendered norm of women’s primary caregiving responsibilities still exists. For example, in Interviewee D’s mind, the “Myth of the First Three Years” is merely a controversial topic from the Internet rather than her internalized belief or a cultural value that permeates her surroundings. This experience of Interviewee D, who is less affected by gender norms than other interviewees, indicates the distance of younger mothers from the myth. In addition, the previously mentioned working mother’s experience with a mother-in-law illustrates a conflict between the behaviours of recent mothers and the beliefs of their parents’ generation. In other words, mothers’ beliefs have gradually changed from what their mothers’ generation believed.

Interviewee D’s response also suggests that there has been an improvement in the length of men’s childcare leave and their working patterns. Of course, much depends on the type of occupation, such as working for a service or IT company, but some companies have become more flexible in allowing one month of childcare leave and remote work. The

conversation with interviewee D suggests that progress has been made, albeit slowly, towards a gender-inclusive work culture.

Despite these few improvements in gender awareness and practices, Interviewee D's experiences also suggest that the "Myth of the First Three Years," which regards parenting as a mother's natural role, has not completely disappeared. For instance, parenting books published after the 2010s still emphasize the importance of a child's life up to the age of three. In addition, the gender norm that positions mothers as the primary caregivers for their children continues to generate criticisms of working mothers leaving their children in daycare. Moreover, the pandemic in 2020 has further exposed this gender norm in parenting responsibilities. Even though a new work style, remote work, has allowed wives and husbands to stay at home, the distribution of domestic work has remained unequal.

To summarize this chapter, the interviews with four working mothers represent two different generations. The narratives of Interviewees A and B, who gave birth in the 1980s and the 1990s, indicate the normative ideas of motherhood in parenting seen in Chapter 3. They quit their jobs and did not find new jobs until their children turned three years old because they believed that this choice was normal and *natural* as mothers.

Interviewees C and D, who have raised children since the 2010s, have different views from Interviewees A and B. These two mothers did not quit their jobs to have children. Instead, they took childcare leave and returned to the same workplace. In addition, their husbands also

took childcare leave to participate in child-rearing. Considering the fact that they returned to work even before their children turned three, these two mothers were less affected by the child-rearing practices that Interviewees A and B believed in. In this way, there has been some progress in parenting behaviours and practices between these two generations.

Despite the growth in working mothers, Interviewee C's story represents the current issues of gender inequality in the workplace and the length of men's childcare leave. While most mothers in her workplace reduce their work hours or transfer to another department with fewer responsibilities after having children, most fathers seek other positions with higher salaries and responsibilities. In addition, although her husband could take childcare leave, the length of the leave was only one week for each child. These trends in the workplace demonstrate that the gender norm for women's household labour has had no significant change, even though both men and women have paid jobs. In the same vein, the examination of Interviewee D's experiences also suggests that the "Myth of the First Three Years" has not entirely disappeared. The phrase "three years of age" still frequently appears as an indicator of child-rearing practices. Also, the consciousness that mothers should stay with their young children generates prejudices against working mothers and children at daycare. These trends illustrate the gender norms embedded in parenting practices and working culture deeply permeated in Japan.

This chapter revealed that twenty years from the official denial of the "Myth of the First

Three Years” was not long enough to diminish the impact of gender norms in parenting labour. The gendered belief that underlies the myth has been deeply ingrained in Japanese parenting for long years, influenced by politics and the media. Gendered beliefs about parenting have affected not only mothers who have young children but also fathers, grandparents, and the workplace. For example, fathers work more to support the increased number of family members, while working mothers reduce their workload to take care of children. Therefore, this normative idea that it is *natural* for mothers to engage in child-rearing has prevented the impact of the myth from fading.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Main Findings and Conclusion

This chapter first summarizes the research findings of this thesis and then moves on to a discussion of the limitations of this thesis and suggestions for future research. After summarizing them, I will next discuss the conclusion of this thesis.

6.1 Research results

This thesis explored the emergence of the “Myth of the First Three Years” by examining the development of the ideology of motherhood since the 1960s in Japan. In addition, I outlined how the gender norm underlying the myth that regards mothers as primarily responsible for child-rearing has affected Japanese parenting practices and responsibilities today. Finally, I discussed the areas of progress and opportunities for growth in the gender division of labour since the 2000s, after the Japanese government officially debunked the myth. This first section of Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings of the research.

First, this thesis revealed the “Myth of the First Three Years” originated from a popular child-rearing theory that gained traction until it lost popularity in the late 1980s. With Japan’s rapid economic growth in the 1960s, expected gender roles in the family were explicitly divided. More specifically, *sarari-man* (office worker) and full-time housewives shaped a dominant family model in Japan, under the slogan “men go to work, women stay at home.” The child-rearing theory, which stemmed from developmental psychology and combined with the

concept of motherhood, became a norm of parenting practice. This child-rearing theory was reinforced by the Japanese government's welfare strategies, which promoted home care for young children before entering pre-school at the age of three, and led to the following belief: mothers must stay with their children until the children turn three, or else children will not have proper development. This child-rearing theory was foundational for full-time housewives to engage in the role of the primary caregivers, supporting their husbands and children at home.

In the late 1980s, however, some scholars cast doubt on the rationale of the theory, which emphasizes three years old as a critical marker for a child's proper development and the gendered dimension that forces women to engage in unpaid domestic work. As a result, as Ozawa states in her 1989 paper, this theory is merely a myth that has no reliable evidence. Thus, this thesis leads to the conclusion that the once-believed parenting theory started to be called a myth in 1989 because its questionable approach was debunked.

Even though the popular child-rearing theory was debunked and became just a myth, it still conveys the belief that mothers should devote themselves to child-rearing. As discussed in Chapter 2, motherhood is a socially constructed gender ideology. In addition, a myth makes ideologies appear natural by normalizing an idea in a certain group. These frameworks of motherhood and myth revealed the core function of the "Myth of the First Three Years": to normalize the Japanese ideology of motherhood. In other words, the myth makes mothers' roles as primary caregivers appear to be women's natural behaviour. This legitimized gender role

has positioned women to take on all domestic and parenting responsibilities.

This normalized gender role became an obstacle for the Japanese government's countermeasures to its demographic challenge. Even after the Japanese government enforced new policies to aim at a society where women could have more children while having paid jobs, the gender norm in parenting remained unchanged. Thus, the impact of the myth, which conveys how it is natural for women to be mainly responsible for caregiving labour, led the Japanese government to officially deny this myth in 1998 *Kōsei Hakusho*.

The Japanese government has promoted a new style of parenting, namely, men's active participation in parenting, to ensure a gender-equal society. One of the major promotions is the *Ikumen* Project, which was launched in 2010. However, the prevailing gender norm of parenting, which regards women as the primary caregivers, has made men's participation in parenting extraordinary. Namely, people's beliefs that child-rearing is women's natural role have led them to perceive men's active parenting as unnatural and thus something special to be rewarded. As a result, the persistent idea of women's natural responsibility for domestic labour has hindered the realization of gender-equal parenting.

While this thesis reveals obstacles to realizing a gender-equal society, the interviews with four Japanese working mothers from two different generations suggest a few improvements happened. For example, while the majority of mothers who had children before the 2000s resigned from jobs and became full-time housewives at least until their children

turned three, more women took childcare leave and returned to the same workplace even before their children turned three after 2010. In addition, not only did the latter mothers take childcare leave, but also their husbands took childcare leave to participate in child-rearing. Given these situations, the gendered concept that places mothers at home with younger children without having a paid job and regards women as primarily responsible for parenting has gradually faded over the years.

Nevertheless, these interviews also exposed that gender stereotypes in domestic and child-rearing labour remained after the 2010s. For instance, some mothers choose to leave their young children at daycare to go to work; others blame these mothers for not properly engaging in child-rearing. Moreover, a new working style that enabled employees to work from home during the pandemic exposed the unequal distribution of domestic labour among couples. Even though both couples work from home, wives are still mainly responsible for parenting and housework. Gender inequality in domestic labour does not depend on the time spent at home but on people's beliefs about gender norms that designate women's primary responsibility for unpaid domestic work.

6.2 Limitations and future research

I conducted most of the research for this thesis and collected much of the data from 2021 to 2022. Because the COVID-19 pandemic made field research in Japan impossible, there

were some limitations in the research process. First, I had planned to study changes in parenting practices discussed in parenting magazines, particularly from the late 1990s to the 2020s, which would have resulted in more original and recent findings. However, I was unable to access those magazines only available at libraries in Japan. Instead, I reviewed a list of sixty parenting magazines from 1945 to 1994 by Shoji et al. (1998), which enabled this thesis to find parenting practices that were popular during Japan's rapid economic growth to before the government's official denial of the "Myth of the First Three Years."

Second, I was unable to conduct interviews with a larger pool of mothers in Japan. As a result, I only had four mothers who agreed to video interviews from Canada. While I had interviewees who had children in the 1980s, the 1990s, the 2010s, and the 2020s, I could not find an interviewee who had children in the 2000s. Interviews with a few more people would have provided a broader range of opinions and experiences from the 1960s to the 2020s. Also, since the interviews were all with mothers, including interviews with fathers would have revealed how women and men share responsibilities in the household. However, by analyzing the responses of the four mothers in two generations (before 2000 and after 2010), Chapter 5 of this thesis successfully clarified both the areas that have changed and the areas that have remained unchanged in child-rearing practices in the two different generations.

In future research, I suggest including men's standpoint to delve into gender equality. Interviews with fathers would shed light on the Japanese gender ideology from a male

perspective, the difficulties of men in balancing working and child-rearing, and the history of the development of Japanese masculinity. For example, while this thesis focused on the burden of women being responsible for all the house chores as full-time housewives, men may also have felt the heavy pressure of providing the sole income as head of the household. Also, as seen in Chapter 4, while men have been encouraged to be involved in parenting, they have been faced with a work environment that discourages them from being fully involved. As with the ideology of motherhood, pursuing normalized Japanese masculinity can prevent men from balancing work and childcare. Therefore, to deepen the research from a position of equality, future research can compare the perspectives of both men and women.

Furthermore, I recommend that future research analyzes the latest policy changes in Japan. Even during this research, several new programs have been launched to enhance equal parenting. For example, the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law was revised in April 2022, and Postpartum Dad Leave began in October 2022 (MHLW, 2022b). My research about the status of childcare leave in Japan revealed various problems behind the stated benefits, including a gender gap in the acquisition rate and only one week of childcare leave taken by the majority of male employees. Future research needs to examine the implementation and results of these new policies, carefully analyzing them with the acquisition rate and the length of the leave. Gender equality is a crucial agenda in present-day Japan and is still in the development stage. I encourage researchers to explore how an ideology shapes gender norms

and impacts people's beliefs, thus hindering the realization of a gender-equal society in Japan.

6.3 Conclusion

This thesis explored the impact of the ideology of motherhood underlying the “Myth of the First Three Years” and revealed it still influences people's beliefs in the gender division of childcare labour in today's Japan. This is because the gender norm regards women's primary responsibility for child-rearing as *natural*. This notion simultaneously makes male child-rearing appear *unnatural*. The “Myth of the First Three Years,” as well as this prevailing gender norm deeply embedded in the Japanese public's beliefs, prevents deconstructing the clear gender division of labour and establishing a new norm of equal child-rearing responsibilities between men and women. In other words, when both men's and women's responsibilities become *natural*, removing gender norms, it is time to realize a gender-equal society. That is when the “Myth of the First Three Years,” which lost the persuasiveness of the gender norms, truly becomes “just a myth.”

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Appendix A

Participant Interview Questions

This research project includes video interviews with four working mothers in Japan. The followings are examples of the questions:

- Have you ever heard of a Japanese motherhood myth called “The Myth of the First Three Years?”
- Has the myth been an obstacle to being a working mother to you? (To two interviewees who have been working mothers)
- How did the myth impact deciding whether to leave your job to have a baby? (To another two interviewees who were full-time mothers when their children were young)
- What was your employment style (full-time, part-time, temporary, or irregular worker) before having a baby?
- Have you ever experienced discrimination because of being a mother in your working place (promotion, salary, etc.)?
- Do (did) you get support from others (your partners, parents, or parents-in-law) for child-rearing?
- Do you divide house chores equally with your partner?

If you have experience being a full-time mother,

- What brought you to become a full-time mother?
- Did you return to work? How old was your child when you went back to work?