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Examining the Relational and Symbolic Aspects of Poverty: Insights from the Narratives of Single Mothers

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Abstract
In Japan, a narrow view of poverty as primarily income and material deprivation continues to prevail, while relational and symbolic harms such as shame, humiliation, and stigma arising in everyday interactions remain insufficiently recognised. As a result, these harms remain largely invisible and unaddressed, undermining the dignity of people experiencing poverty. This study examines the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty and contributes to a generous understanding of poverty. Drawing on a participatory approach and qualitative data from two participatory poverty research projects, the study reveals the social prejudice and discrimination that welfare-recipient single mothers encounter across key spheres of everyday life, including the residential community, workplace, social institutions, support organisations, and the media. Drawing on these experiences, it underscores the importance of understanding poverty through its relational and symbolic dimensions. The results reveal three key points. First, in the experiences of the single mothers examined in this study, poverty involved material and economic deprivation, along with relational and symbolic aspects, such as shame, humiliation, and feelings of powerlessness, which emerged through interactions with social others and could further reinforce poverty. Second, focusing on these aspects enables one to understand people in poverty as active agents who, despite enduring constraints, cope as best they can. Third, these constraints are underpinned by the fact that people in poverty are not recognised as "equal partners in social interaction." Therefore, beyond conventional poverty discussions that emphasise income-centred redistribution, this study argues for the importance of respecting and recognising people in poverty as equal members of society and enabling their participation in discussions concerning matters that affect them.

Keywords: *social welfare, single mothers, prejudice and discrimination, participatory poverty research, Japan.*

INTRODUCTION

Following the 2008 Lehman Shock, interest in poverty has once again grown in Japan. Researchers' observations have broadened awareness of poverty in Japanese society; however, issues remain regarding the determination of poverty standards. In Western poverty research, a shared understanding has developed regarding how poverty should be defined. One of its norms is that the concept of poverty in developed countries is assessed relatively within that society. However, in Japan, this concept of relative poverty has not been widely accepted by the public, and even among researchers, some uncertainty and fluctuation remain [1]. People tend to perceive poverty solely as material deprivation, indicating that a "narrow understanding of poverty" is prevalent [2, 3]. This narrow understanding, centred on material deprivation, downplays the constraints and impacts of poverty's non-material aspects, such as the subjective feelings of humiliation and powerlessness that people in poverty endure [4].

Regarding the material and non-material aspects of poverty, Lister [5, p. 10] integrated them into a "material and non-material wheel of poverty" model. This model positioned the material core of poverty at the wheel's axle as "unacceptable hardship." The wheel's outer rim represented the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty experienced by people living in this "unacceptable hardship," including society's disregard for poverty, humiliation, stigma, a lack of respect, and powerlessness, and so on. Both the hub and the rim were shaped by social and cultural relationships.

Thus, material needs at the hub were socially and culturally defined. They were mediated and interpreted at the relational/symbolic rim, which revolved in the social and cultural sphere to produce social suffering [5]. Lister [5] further argued that the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty emerged from everyday interactions between people living in poverty and wider society, particularly from how influential actors and institutions, such as public officials and the media, spoke about and treated those in poverty.

Hence, this study problematizes the above mentioned "narrow understanding of poverty" and illuminates the realities of the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty as experienced by people living in poverty, contributing to a more generous understanding of poverty. It takes welfare-recipient single mothers as its object of analysis and focuses, in particular, on the social prejudice and discrimination they experience. The reasons for this analytical framing are as follows.

First, this study takes welfare-recipient single mothers as its object of analysis for the following reason. According to the survey data published by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [6], [7], the average annual income of single-mother households in Japan was 3.73 million yen, only 48% of the average household income of 7.85 million yen among households with children, nearly half of single-mother households have lived below the poverty line, enduring severe economic hardship [8]. Therefore, single mothers, as a group in Japan, have long been viewed as a prototypical case of people burdened by poverty [9]. Undoubtedly, not all single mothers are poor. In this study, poverty is seen as living on a low income while receiving welfare benefits. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on single mothers who receive such services.

Second, this study focuses on social prejudice and discrimination in its analysis of the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty for the following reason. Prejudice and discrimination constitute core elements of the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty. In particular, gender-based hardships faced by single mothers, such as limited employment opportunities and prevailing family norms [10], [11], [12], are often individualised, being interpreted as a "mother's lack of effort" or as "the consequence of choosing divorce." Consequently, single mothers are especially vulnerable to such prejudice and discrimination [13], [14]. In this regard, Hokkaido University's (Education and Welfare Research Group)

"Hokkaido Single-Parent Living Conditions Survey" has been conducted continuously in Hokkaido for approximately 30 years, either as the lead organiser or as a collaborator. According to these surveys, the proportion of single mothers who felt social prejudice because of their social status remained consistently close to 50%: 44.8% in 1996 [15], 48.2% in 2004 [16], 48.3% in 2009 [17], and 55.3% in 2013 [18]. Subsequently, while some improvement was noted, with 26.3% in 2017 [19] and 26.1% in 2022 [20], the level remained close to 30%, which is still too high to ignore.

The above discussion has explained the rationale for setting the focus and research questions of this study with reference to statistical data. However, statistical data alone cannot reveal what actually occurs in specific situations of prejudice and discrimination [21], [22], [23]. Hence, a qualitative analysis using narrative and experiential data is required [24]. Regarding this issue, in Western societies, there is a certain amount of qualitative research showing that mothers receiving welfare benefits, whose circumstances strongly overlap with poverty, face prejudice, discrimination, and moral condemnation [25], [26], [27], [28]. In Japan, such empirical research remains limited [29]. Among the limited research available, Kambara [30] is a representative study. Kambara [30] first conducted a quantitative analysis and then supplemented it with qualitative research, revealing that the hardships faced by single-mother households stem not only from economic problems but are amplified by non-economic factors such as discrimination and prejudice directed toward single parents. However, the main focus of Kambara's qualitative analysis lies on the Buraku (marginalised communities in Japan) and marriage (marital discrimination, kinship relations, etc.), leaving room for further examination of how prejudice and discrimination operate in the daily interactions between single mothers and social others. Hence, this study analyses data obtained from two research projects conducted by the author over the past six years. An overview of the two projects is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the two research projects

No.	Period	Area	Sample size and recruitment strategy	Method
1	2021–2024	Hokkaido, northern Japan	A total of 32 participants, including four single mothers, were recruited to form eight focus groups, balanced by gender, social status (students/employed), and nationality (Japanese/foreigners). Recruitment was conducted via anti-poverty organisations, social networking groups, and student networks.	A participatory poverty research approach was used and conducted three times for each group.
2	2024–2026	Kyushu, southern Japan	Five single mothers (one participant attended only the first discussion, and another only the second) formed one group and were recruited through a local peer-support organisation for single mothers.	A participatory poverty research approach was used and conducted twice.

Note: Main data from the two projects have been used in the analysis of the respective research topics. As the participatory research generated a large amount of data across multiple sessions, similar topics sometimes recurred across or within the groups. This study therefore utilises the unused and unpublished data from the two projects.

Research No. 1 was conducted to examine poverty from the perspective of those experiencing poverty, including single mothers. Research No.2 was conducted to examine the child-rearing difficulties faced by single mothers living in poverty. Although the two projects

had different primary themes, they shared five features: (1) Target population: Both included single mothers receiving welfare benefits. Although the degree of poverty differed between the two single mother groups (see Table 2), all participants were single mothers experiencing livelihood difficulties. (2) Regional contexts: Research No. 1 was conducted in Hokkaido, northern Japan, and Research No. 2 in Kyushu, southern Japan. The two sites are geographically distant, but both are located outside Honshu (Japan's main island) and share structural features common to regional Japan, such as employment opportunities and the distribution of social resources. (3) Temporal and social contexts: Research No. 1 was conducted from January to October 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research No. 2 was conducted from December 2024 to November 2025, amid ongoing severe price inflation in Japan. Both projects were conducted at times when people were under intense pressure in everyday life. (4) Theme: Both engaged participants in discussions of how they perceived and experienced their everyday lives in an open-ended and interactive manner. This allowed the collection of narratives concerning the social prejudice and discrimination experienced by the participants, particularly those in the two single-mother groups. (5) Research method: Both projects were conducted by the same researcher using the same methodological approach: participatory poverty research. This approach enabled the researcher to quickly access various sources of information; gather diverse information under a single research framework; and develop the discussion through the participants' immediate responses, agreement, and additional comments based on similar experiences [31, pp. 8, 12]. These shared features provide the empirical foundation for the analysis presented in this article.

METHOD

The data used for the present analysis were drawn from parts of the discussions conducted with the two single-mother groups shown in Table 1, and they are reorganised in Tables 2 and 3. This section outlines the research and data organisation procedure.

Participatory Research Procedure

In Table 2, Group 1 refers to a single-mother group included in Research No.1 in Table 1. All four single mothers in this group received public assistance (indicating severe poverty in Japan) and experienced high levels of hardship. Group 2 refers to Research No.2 in Table 1. The five single mothers in this group did not receive public assistance; however, they all had low incomes and received welfare benefits.

Table 2. Study summary

	Group 1	Group 2
Period and number of gatherings	2021–2024 (3 meetings)	2024–2026 (2 meetings)
Number of participants and attributes	Four single mothers (divorced). All received public assistance. Some lived in public housing, and some had experienced homelessness.	Five single mothers (divorced). All received the child-rearing allowance. Some lived in public housing, and some received the special child-rearing allowance.
Degree of hardship	High; barely maintaining the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter.	Less severe than Group 1; however, low income with little financial slack.
Recruitment	Recruited with the cooperation of an anti-poverty organisation in northern Japan (Hokkaido).	Recruited with the cooperation of a single-mother support organisation in southern Japan (Kyushu).
Method	Participatory approach	
Theme	Social prejudice and discrimination experienced as single mothers.	

Venue	All meetings were held in the conference rooms of cooperating organisations. This was considered appropriate, as it provided the participants with a familiar environment.
Environment preparation	To foster a formal atmosphere, attention was paid to seating layouts and name card holders. Memo supplies, snacks, and coffee were provided for discussion. This reflected the intention to position the participants as experts on the topic and respect their knowledge and experience.
Duration and honorarium	2.5 hours for the first meeting and 2 hours from the second meeting onward. Participants needed to set aside half a day for participation, an honorarium equivalent to the time commitment was provided. The payment appropriately recognised their contributions.
Support arrangements	For Group 1, as public assistance recipients, car ownership was not permitted. Therefore, transportation was provided to minimise the time participants spent away from their children. Group 2 participants owned cars, and some drove themselves and wished to bring their children. In these cases, childcare was arranged in a separate room on the same premises as the discussion venue, staffed by professional childcare workers.

Note 1: Public assistance provides the minimum necessary livelihood for individuals experiencing severe financial hardship. Child-rearing allowance targets low-income, single-parent households. Special child-rearing allowance targets low-income households raising children with disabilities. Public housing is rental housing provided at low rent for low-income people who have difficulty securing adequate housing.

Note 2: This research and related analyses have been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, Hokkaido University, Japan (Approval Nos. 20-34 and 24-46).

A participatory approach was utilised in the two research groups. According to Bennett and Roberts [32], participatory poverty research gives people with direct experience of poverty the right to a voice and greater control over the research process. Participatory poverty research thus helps us understand the realities faced by people in poverty. While an understanding of the material and economic aspects of poverty, such as those centred on income, is important, it represents only part of the picture [33]. Participatory poverty research illuminates the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty, such as feelings of social inferiority, powerlessness, and humiliation, which often fall outside conventional understandings of poverty [5]. Moreover, participatory poverty research incorporates more perspectives from people with lived experience of poverty, capturing broader implications and impacts than the "concepts of poverty" constructed by traditional researchers, politicians, the poverty lobby, and the media [34]. These advantages are well-suited to the aims of this research. In this study, both research groups were conducted with reference to Chen's [35], [36] discussion of practical issues in implementing participatory poverty research. Chen drew on Bennett and Roberts' [32] framework while considering its application in the Japanese context. The main practical issues encountered in applying this participatory approach to the two groups, and how they were addressed, are described below.

First, at the participant recruitment stage, the main issues were how to communicate information about the study and how to prepare an appropriate research environment. With regard to the former, communication with the support organisations proceeded in two broad phases. First, the researcher visited the organisations and explained the intention to conduct the study and its general content, then requested cooperation in recruiting participants. After obtaining their agreement to cooperate, the researcher further explained and confirmed more concrete details with the organisations, including the specific content of the study, the research period, the honorarium, support arrangements for the participants, and ethical considerations. Through this process, and with the cooperation of the support organisations, information about the study could be communicated to potential participants in a more complete and understandable form. With regard to the latter, the preparation of the research environment focused on reducing the practical constraints and burdens that might hinder participation, while also creating a setting in which participants could feel safe, secure, and respected. As shown in

Table 2, this involved practical arrangements such as selecting an appropriate venue, scheduling meetings at accessible times, providing an honorarium, and offering additional support, including transportation by car and childcare services.

Second, at the group discussion stage, two issues were particularly important: enabling participants to bring their own thoughts and concerns into the concrete discussions and allowing them to discuss these topics interactively with each other. To address these issues, in both groups, the researcher distributed a one-page A4 outline of the purpose of the study, as well as the broad themes of each meeting. In Group 1, which focused on poverty, the three meetings addressed, respectively, "the meaning of poverty," "worries and difficulties," and "confirmation of and comments on the research findings." In Group 2, which focused on child-rearing difficulties, the two meetings addressed, respectively, "living and health conditions, and the use of welfare benefits" and "daily time use and social relationships." In this way, rather than preparing a detailed list of specific questions, the researcher set only one or two open-ended themes for each meeting. This allowed the participants to understand the general topic of the meeting while also enabling them to introduce concrete issues that were important to them into the discussion. In addition, the study adopted a group discussion format so that, when discussing the specific topics they had raised, participants could interactively develop the discussion among themselves without being overly influenced by the researcher's views or assumptions. This format enabled single mothers with shared experiences to understand one another while minimising power imbalances between the researcher and participants. During the discussions, the researcher mainly served as a facilitator.

Finally, participants in both groups were given opportunities to confirm and comment on the research findings. One of the principles of participatory poverty research is that participants should not be treated as mere "tools" who are just there to provide personal "sad stories." Rather, participants should be guaranteed a certain degree of control over the research process and be able to influence how the findings are presented and used. Accordingly, in Group 1, the participants confirmed and commented on the findings during the third meeting. In Group 2, a third meeting could not be held because some participants had moved away or faced time constraints. Instead, the researcher confirmed the findings individually with each participant after the two group discussions. Specifically, the findings presented to the participants for confirmation were produced through the following procedures. With the participants' consent, the group discussions were audio recorded. Participants were also informed that, if they did not wish certain parts of the discussion to be recorded, they could request that the recording be stopped for those parts. The recordings were then transcribed by the researcher (author). The raw data were cleaned by removing identifying information, filler expressions, and content clearly unrelated to the research themes. The cleaned data were then organised by themes and topics, and readable transcripts were prepared. These prepared transcripts and preliminary findings were then returned to the participants for confirmation and comments. Participants in both groups not only confirmed the content of the data but also commented on how the data should be written up in future reports and articles. Their comments included the importance of remaining faithful to the original meaning of their statements, adding clarifying descriptions of body language and the atmosphere of the discussion where necessary, presenting both commonalities and differences in the discussions, and protecting participants' privacy as much as possible. More detailed methodological information on Group 1 is provided in Chen [36]. The method used for Group 2 basically followed the same methodological approach adopted for Group 1. The following paragraphs explain how the confirmed findings were analysed and presented in this study.

Data Organisation and Presentation

Building on the preceding methodological explanation, the following paragraphs explain how this theme was identified and analysed using the data generated from the two group discussions.

First, regarding the setting of topics, as mentioned earlier, in both groups, before the discussions began, the researcher shared with the participants the purpose and themes (the main theme and sub-themes shown in Table 3) of the study for discussion. The author explained that the overall structure and process of the study could be changed if the participants wished it, and emphasised that these themes were only a broad framework prepared to facilitate the discussion. In response, the participants commented that whilst they could not think of any specific topics to add immediately, they would speak up if anything came to mind as the discussion progressed. The researcher accepted this response and then began the group discussion. The broad themes set for the two groups and the concrete topics that emerged in each group are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. The topic clusters generated in the two groups

Group	Main theme	Sub-theme	Topic clusters generated in the discussions
G1	Poverty	Poverty discourse	○ Images and understandings of poverty-related terms ● Intrusive remarks about divorce and remarriage in the residential community ○ Dissatisfaction with media coverage ● Ambivalent feelings in relationships with support organisations
		Meaning of poverty	○ Income insufficiency despite overwork ○ Child labour ○ Lack of food, clothing, housing, and daily necessities ○ Constraints on spending for children's education and daily living ○ Emotional, psychological, and mental distress ○ Receiving public assistance
		Concerns and difficulties	○ Future ◎ Experiences of applying for and receiving public assistance ○ Leaving public assistance under harsh conditions ○ Dissatisfaction with media coverage ○ Lack of personal time or time with children due to multiple jobs ○ Money for children's extracurricular activities and education
		Review and comments on findings	○ Having a voice heard by society ◎ Visits by caseworkers ● Intrusive remarks about divorce and remarriage in the residential community ○ Restrictions on employment and daily life due to the prohibition of car ownership ● Resistance to media coverage
G2	Childrearing difficulties	Living conditions	○ Holding multiple jobs ○ Shouldering the burdens of work, housework, childrearing, and parental care alone ○ Changes in living standards after divorce ○ Constraints on spending for children's education and daily living
		Health conditions	○ Chronic fatigue, psychological stress, and experiences of emergency transport ○ Refraining from seeking medical care

		Use of welfare benefits	○ Income restrictions on the child-rearing allowance ◎ Experiences of applying for welfare benefits ○ Experiences of using non-governmental support
		Daily time use	○ Holding multiple jobs ○ Reduced sleep and reduced time with children
		Social relationships	○ Raising children alone without relying on others ● Intrusive remarks about divorce and remarriage in the residential community ◎ Flippant and prejudiced remarks in the workplace ○ Exclusion or lack of consideration towards single mothers in kindergartens and schools ● Resistance to media coverage ● Ambivalent feelings in relationships with support organisations

To summarise and organise the discussion content shown in Table 3, the author first classified the previously confirmed transcripts according to the broad themes set for the discussions, as shown in the "Sub-theme" column of Table 3. The author then conducted a second-level classification of the more specific topics that emerged from the discussions under each sub-theme, as shown in the "Topic clusters generated in the discussions" column. This entire process was conducted by the author alone; therefore, it may have been somewhat influenced by the author's interpretive judgment. However, the preceding process, where the participants reviewed and commented on the findings, helped reduce this risk. It should also be noted that, because the discussions were organised around open-ended themes, the specific topic clusters that emerged under each sub-theme do not always correspond neatly to that sub-theme. For the same reason, the same or similar topics were sometimes mentioned more than once within the same group.

Among the topics in Table 3, those marked with ［○］ are topics whose related data had already been used for the purposes of the original studies, or whose direct relevance to the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty examined in this article was limited. These topics were therefore not used in the present analysis. Among the remaining topics after excluding ［○］, those marked with ［●］ are directly relevant to the argument of this study and appeared in both groups, while those marked with ［◎］ were mentioned in only one group but are important for understanding the prejudice and discrimination experienced by single mothers through interactions with social others. The analysis of this study used the topics marked with ［●］ and ［◎］. The topics marked with ［●］ were used to show commonalities between the two groups, while those marked with ［◎］ were used to supplement the analysis by showing the specific characteristics of each group.

Second, regarding the writing-up of the research results based on the confirmed findings, (1) although the study adopted a participatory approach and the meetings were conducted as group discussions, the conversations did not always proceed in a sequence in which one participant spoke and another responded. Participants sometimes expressed their views independently, without building on the preceding speaker. Participants had their "priority topics" that they had long reflected on and considered important. When a related topic arose, they raised their "priority topic" first. Therefore, the findings and data are presented in parallel using two threads. Thread 1 presents the discussion and content as a group discussion. Thread 2 presents the content discussed by each participant based on their individual thoughts. (2) As shown in Table 3, some topics were mentioned more than once within the same group or across both groups. When similar or overlapping content appeared under the same topic, concise and clear statements were selected as representative examples. (3) Furthermore, to protect the participants' privacy, before the discussions began, the researcher explained the study as part

of the informed consent process and confirmed, both orally and in writing, that neither the researcher nor the participants would disclose personal information obtained through the research. To prevent the participants from being identified through their comments, the letters A, B, C, and D were used for each group and topic; these letters do not refer to the same participant. (4) The findings were organised primarily around participants' narratives, with minimal author comments. The author's comments were used mainly to connect participants' statements and enhance the continuity and clarity of the discussion. Necessary sociological comments were added only at the end of each setting-based narrative, in order to meet the standards of academic analysis. Although this made some quotations relatively long, it was intended to position the participants as the primary agents of the research and as "experts" in the field, ensuring the principle of participation. (5) Both group discussions were conducted in Japanese, whereas this article was written in English. The participants' statements were translated from Japanese into English by the author. To convey the participants' cultural practices and ways of speaking as faithfully as possible, the author added explanatory notes for some terms. For example, participants commonly referred to social workers as "caseworkers"; therefore, this article uses the expression "caseworkers (social workers)" where necessary. In addition, to better convey how the discussions unfolded, the author added explanations of the participants' body language and the relationships between people mentioned in the narratives. Examples include "this big paper (holding up an A4-sized sheet)" and "my then husband (now my ex-husband)."

Finally, regarding the analytical settings, as noted in the previous section, both groups discussed how the participants perceived and experienced their lives. Within these discussions, accounts of social prejudice and discrimination experienced by single mothers emerged as a shared theme. To present this theme, this study drew on Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective [37], which understands people's experiences as being shaped through multiple layers of social environments, ranging from immediate interpersonal settings to broader institutional and cultural contexts. Accordingly, the data in this study were organised according to the relative distance between the interactional settings and the participants' everyday lives. The five settings were arranged from more immediate to more institutional and mediated contexts: Residential Community, Workplace, Social Institutions, Support Organisations, and Media (although not a face-to-face setting, the media are encountered routinely in daily life). By organising the data in this way, this study sought to present, as systematically as possible given the limitations of the available data, the multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination experienced by single mothers across different everyday settings and to reveal the mechanisms underlying these experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines how prejudice and discrimination against single mothers were experienced and produced across the five settings outlined in the previous section.

Residential Community

In both groups, participants reported intrusive remarks from neighbours in their residential communities, such as "Why did you get divorced?" "Why don't you remarry?" and "You should remarry." They further mentioned sarcastic or derisive comments, such as "I hope you don't end up divorced again," along with moralising statements that imposed normative expectations, including "Women should endure" and "You need to be more mature."

A: People also talk about the kind of family you grew up in, right? My parents remarried. And when I remarried—my then husband (now my ex-husband) and I had both been divorced once already—neighbours said things like, "I hope you don't end up divorced again."

B: A lot of people are still stuck on this idea that it's always better for a child if both parents are together.

C: I left because I thought, "With someone like that, it's better to separate." But an older woman in my neighbourhood talked to me harshly: "It's pitiful if a child doesn't have both parents," and "You should remarry." I barely knew her, but she suddenly came to my house and scolded me for about an hour. She kept asking, "Why did you get divorced?" "Why couldn't you endure it?" She kept saying things like, "You didn't try hard enough," and "It's your fault." I tried to explain, maybe I could have endured more, but he had serious problems too. But she wouldn't listen. Her words sound like "Women are supposed to endure," and "You need to be more mature." In the end, I was crying and could only say, "I'm sorry." (Group 2)

In Group 1, in addition to narratives similar to those of Group 2, one participant living in public housing recounted an experience in which a neighbour remarked, "It would be financially easier to raise children with two parents." In a public housing complex, where residents mostly have limited financial resources, neighbours likely perceived her as a single mother raising children in poverty, which contributed to such remarks.

- When I was relaxing with my child in the park under our apartment (the public housing complex), one neighbour noticed that I wasn't wearing a ring and asked, "Why did you split up?" At first, she said things like, "Your child is so cute," and started chatting with me. But then she ended up saying, "Why don't you remarry?" and "It must be hard to raise a child on your own; with two parents, it's financially a bit easier." I was thinking, "I left because I wanted to. You don't know anything about my situation, so why would you say that?" (Group 1)

Hence, the experiences of single mothers within their residential communities were closely tied to gendered family norms and the symbolic harm they produce. The neighbours' remarks did not merely express curiosity about divorce or remarriage; rather, they treated divorce as something requiring explanation and positioned the two-parent family as the assumed norm. Comments such as "Why did you get divorced?" and "Why couldn't you endure it?" transformed a private family decision into an object of moral judgment. Statements such as "Women should endure," "You didn't try hard enough," and "It's your fault" further implied that the women themselves were responsible for failing to maintain the family. In this way, single mothers were placed in a position where they had to justify their life choices as wives, mothers, and family members. In some cases, this judgement was also linked to assumptions about economic hardship, as single motherhood was associated with the difficulty of raising children alone. Thus, in the residential community, prejudice operated through the moralization of divorce; normalisation of the two-parent family; and evaluation of single mothers' family form, life choices, economic situation, and moral character.

Workplace

Only one participant in Group 2, who held a full-time position, experienced prejudice or discrimination at work. The other participants did not hold full-time positions, so they were less integrated into their workplaces and had fewer workplace-related experiences to share.

A: After my divorce, I moved here and began working part-time. Since no one at work knew me, I was starting a new life from scratch, and I still hadn't really settled into the workplace. So I didn't feel much prejudice or discrimination. More than anything, I was just trying to get by. I feel like I've simply been pushing through, day after day, doing my best.

B: I have worked at my current company as a full-time [--] (low-wage occupation) for a long time. After my divorce, people started speaking to me more frivolously. Particularly, male colleagues began inviting me out more often in a casual way, saying things like, "You must be free since you're alone," or "Let's go for drinks." But for me, after the divorce, I actually have less time and money. So, if I have time, I'd rather go to a part-time job. Since my divorce, I've tried hard not to look "struggling" or "poor" to others. Even when my life is barely getting by, I act like, "I'm fine, it's not that bad." Sometimes I want to treat myself and buy a slightly nicer outfit or a bag. But at work, when I brought a branded bag, someone said, "Oh, you bought a designer bag. Did you catch a rich guy?" (Group 2)

As shown above, workplace remarks such as "You must be free since you're alone" and "Let's go for drinks" were not simply casual invitations. These remarks produced symbolic harm by suggesting that a divorced participant's private life and interpersonal boundaries could be approached more lightly. The latter comment, "Did you catch a rich guy?" also shows that her consumption was interpreted through the lens of assumptions about poverty and dependency. Although she had purchased the item with her own earnings, her ownership of a branded bag was treated as suspicious and attributed to a presumed relationship with a man. The participant was therefore positioned not only as economically vulnerable but also as a woman whose private life, sexuality, and consumption were open to public commentary. Thus, in the workplace, prejudice operated through the intersection of gendered judgment and poverty stigma, undermining her dignity and credibility as an independent worker.

Social Institutions

This subsection examines interactions with welfare offices and related personnel. It further describes how, due to certain operational features of Japan's social security system, public assistance recipients (Group 1) were treated differently. In both cases, the accounts reveal the stigma associated with living in poverty and receiving welfare benefits.

Welfare and Related Offices

All the participants in Group 1 received public assistance and spoke at length about their experiences when applying for it.

A: I went there by myself the first time. I told them how hard things were for me: my body had broken down, I was divorced, and I was raising two children on my own. But they just said I was not eligible and did nothing for me. Later, after I consulted [--] (organisation name) and went there with a supporter, their attitude changed completely.

B: Same for me. When you go alone, it feels like they don't really listen. I went because I was struggling, but it felt like they were testing me, like, "Is that really true?" But when I went with someone from [--] (organisation name), their attitude was completely different. They started checking with other staff and even called a supervisor.

A: In the end, it feels like they're not judging whether you "need" it, but who you came with; it's just discrimination! It's like they're not judging whether you're in need, but

whether you're "trustworthy." In the end, it comes down to power, who has it and who doesn't. (Group 1)

Moreover, Group 1 mentioned the psychological burden felt during interactions with assigned caseworkers (social workers) while receiving public assistance.

A: The caseworker comes to my house a lot.
B: Yeah, it feels like they're always pressuring you.
A: It starts with questions like where you were born and who raised you. That kind of initial check is just once, but after that, they do home visits like, "How are things right now?" It depends on the person; some come once a month, some only once every half year. There's a kind of ranking. If you're seen as unable to work, they don't come as much. But if they think you can work and become independent, they come every month. Basically, they want to get you off public assistance.
B: For me, at the beginning, the worker came once a month, very regularly. If I wasn't home, they'd leave a note in my mailbox and missed calls. Many times, because I was working part-time, I couldn't answer. But when I called back after work, it was already too late. I even told them, "I can't take calls during these hours because I'm working," but after that, they came almost every week. I got very stressed. So, I talked to [--] (organisation name), and they helped tell the office, "She is working." After that, they started adjusting, like, "Could I come around 7 p.m.?" Then it became once every three months, and now it's about once every six months. Due to COVID, sometimes they don't come and handle it over the phone. (Group 1)

As illustrated, when receiving public assistance, interactions with a caseworker, including frequent "home visits" and an approach driven by an intention to "get them off public assistance," were perceived by single mothers as managerial and supervisory. This created stress and burden.

However, some narratives revealed positive feelings toward caseworkers. Nonetheless, since some participants wished to keep their receipt of public assistance a secret, they reported a complex mix of feelings, including discomfort about the possibility that a caseworker might visit.

C: (Continuing from above) After separating from my husband, I went on public assistance. My caseworker told me, "Make your child your priority," so I was able to spend time at home with my child while she was still very young.
D: My caseworker says things like, "It's important to spend time with your child, so you don't have to rush into working." But I was always worried that if people found out I was on public assistance, my child might get teased or told something somewhere. So, I made sure never to tell anyone. We live in public housing, and people can easily see who comes and goes. That's why I really didn't like it when the caseworker came to visit. (Group 1)

Group 2 did not receive public assistance and had fewer interactions with welfare offices than Group 1. However, the participants described a strong sense of powerlessness when dealing with the municipal office while applying for financial aid for educational expenses.

A: The first time, I went to the office crying. They just said, "You are not qualified to apply, that's the town's rule." It felt like they were telling me, "You're not in a position to appeal." I went there because I needed help, but when they fall back on rules, it feels like they won't even engage with you. I thought, "There's nothing I can do." I was frustrated that I didn't have the knowledge, and irritated with myself for not being able to argue back. I just felt powerless and sad. But when I went with [--] (organisation supporter), the response was totally different. They took me to a private room, even served tea, listened properly, and I felt "treated with respect." That's why the difference in how I was treated when I went alone felt like discrimination.

B: People around me told me that if you go alone, you probably won't get it. Going to the office is a high hurdle, isn't it? It takes a lot of courage just to go. Every time I went, I ended up crying on the way home. Just having to explain that I'm struggling and want to apply for something made me feel ashamed. It was really painful. (Group 2)

Hence, when applying for welfare support, single mothers experienced responses that made them feel that they were not being heard on equal terms. The participants felt that officials judged not only whether they needed assistance but also who they came with and whether they appeared trustworthy. This suggests that the issue was not only access to welfare benefits but also access to recognition as a credible speaker. When the participants appeared alone, their accounts of hardship were more easily doubted, dismissed, or reduced to administrative rules; when accompanied by a supporter, their words were more likely to be taken seriously. In this sense, institutional asymmetry produced powerlessness by placing applicants in a position where they had to explain their needs but could not easily make their accounts accepted as legitimate. This resonates with Patrick's [40] argument that the receipt of social security can involve relational harms, including misrecognition and disrespect in encounters with welfare systems.

Hospitals and Pharmacies

The following illustrates experiences specific to Group 1, who received public assistance. In Japan, public assistance recipients may be required to follow procedures different from those of other patients when visiting medical institutions or obtaining prescription medications at pharmacies. They must contact their caseworker beforehand and, at the reception desk, present a large-format document instead of a health insurance card (public assistance recipients are not issued an insurance card). This makes it easier for others to recognise their status, often creating psychological burdens and feelings of stigma when seeking medical care.

A: If we had an insurance card, just having that card would prevent a lot of this discrimination. But because we can't get one, every time we go to the hospital, we have to contact the worker first. Then, when we get to the hospital, we have to say, "I'm on public assistance." I really wish that part could disappear. If it did, we could go to the hospital like anyone else, without having to reveal it. But the system, and the welfare office, feel kind of mean.

B: That's where I feel discriminated against. It's like they're saying, "Oh, you're not a normal person." I hate that.

A: Why can't they just give us a normal-sized card? We have to bring this big paper (holding up an A4-sized sheet) that says, "I'm on public assistance," and we have to take it to the hospital.

C: When you go to a new hospital, you call your caseworker and say, “I want to go to the hospital.” Then the caseworker says, “Okay, I’ll call the hospital for you.” The hospital staff will then know you are on public assistance, so they quietly prepare the forms, the prescription, and everything else. You don’t have to pay, but it’s like everyone knows you’re on public assistance.

A: At the reception desk, you have to say, “I’m on public assistance. My caseworker should have called.” But when you say that to a young receptionist, sometimes they react like, “What?!”

C: If it’s someone kind or someone who understands public assistance, they’ll whisper to their young colleague at reception, “We got the call,” in a low voice. But sometimes you get people who react like, “What?!” just like you said.

B: And it’s not only the hospital. It’s the pharmacy too, when you go to pick up medicine. When you hand over the prescription, sometimes the staff look at your coloured nails and ask, in a way like, “Are you really sick?” There were also times when the pharmacy staff looked at the prescription and the type of medicine and said something sarcastic like, “You look pretty healthy today.” Because people like that exist, it makes it hard to go to hospitals or pharmacies when you’re on public assistance. From their point of view, people on public assistance don’t go to work, so the attitude is basically, “Then don’t even go to the hospital.”

D: If we didn’t have to worry about being seen as poor, the system would be easier to use. But they make it hard on purpose; that’s why many people hate it and want to end assistance as soon as possible. Then they work and work, and in the end their bodies break down. (Group 1)

Such experiences at hospitals and pharmacies were primarily related to poverty and the receipt of public assistance rather than single motherhood itself. The participants’ accounts show that stigma was produced not only through insensitive remarks by individual staff members, such as “Are you really sick?” or “You look pretty healthy today,” but also through institutional procedures. Having to contact a caseworker before visiting a hospital, to say “I’m on public assistance” at the reception desk, and presenting a “big paper” instead of an ordinary health insurance card, made their welfare status visible to others. This visibility was not chosen by the participants but was produced through administrative procedures. In this sense, the large-format document functioned as a symbolic marker: during access to medical care, it exposed their welfare status and distinguished public assistance recipients from “ordinary” patients.

Support Organizations

The participants held somewhat complex feelings toward support organisations. One participant in Group 2 stated that the organisation had genuinely helped her in daily life and in navigating public assistance. She described herself as “grateful” and “glad I came,” as it provided information, material support, and connections with others. However, she noted that such organisations were, after all, “places for support,” and that each time she participated, she was reminded that she was in a position of needing help, which brought a sense of hesitation and self-consciousness.

- I take part in [--] (organisation name), and to be honest, my feelings are complicated. It’s basically a place that “supports people in poverty.” When I join, I get useful knowledge and information, and I receive supplies like rice. I talk with people who have similar experiences, and sometimes that makes me feel a bit lighter. In that sense, it

really helps me. So, I feel like, "I'm glad I came," and "I'm grateful." But, at the same time, every time I join, I can't help feeling like I'm here to "receive relief." It's not something I can feel "proud" of. So, there's a sense of shame mixed into how I see myself. Sometimes I think, "When will I be able to get out of being supported?" The gratitude of being helped and the pain of being made aware of myself as someone in a poor position come together. (Group 2)

Similarly, participants in Group 1 expressed ambivalent feelings toward support organisations. Building connections with others and receiving practical assistance, such as help in securing housing and applying for public assistance, were viewed positively.

- I came here [--] (place name) from my hometown when I was [--] (age). I was homeless for several days. A friend introduced me to [--] (organisation name) as a place to consult, and through that connection, I gradually found a place to live and started using public assistance. At that time, I definitely felt isolated. If I hadn't connected with [--] (organisation name), I might have stayed alone in my room and lived an unhealthy life. (Group 1)

However, participants also described negative feelings about being treated as "people who need support" or as "pitiful." They experienced intrusive and unwanted concern, which they perceived as "meddling."

- (Continuing from above) It's true they helped me a lot, and I'm really grateful. But honestly, it can feel unpleasant at times. My divorce spread within the organisation, and my story was even included as a case in one of their booklets. It said things like, "She got divorced, she's on public assistance now, and she's doing her best on her own." After people read it, they started talking about me and getting involved in ways that weren't necessary, like "How is she doing?" and [--]. It felt ridiculous and unbelievable. I couldn't stand these people. For a while, it even made me unable to trust people. (Group 1)

Hence, single mothers held complex feelings towards support organisations, combining gratitude with self-consciousness and hesitation. Support organisations provided information, material supplies, connections with others, and practical assistance in accessing public welfare programs and services. In this sense, they played an important role in sustaining the participants' lives and reducing their isolation. However, receiving support could also make the participants more aware of themselves as people in a position of need. The feeling of coming to "receive relief" was not simply an individual sense of shame but reflected the symbolic position attached to being a recipient of support. Moreover, the account in which a participant's divorce and public assistance experience were presented as a "case" in an organisational booklet shows how support practices can raise questions of representation. Even when intended to generate understanding or assistance, turning lived experience into an illustrative case may unintentionally position the person as "pitiful" or an object of concern. Thus, in support organisations, relational and symbolic harm could emerge not from the support itself but from forms of support and representation that, when insufficiently attentive to the person's intentions, privacy, and self-definition, reproduce symbolic inequality.

Media

This subsection examined how single mothers perceived media coverage and articles about single mothers and single-mother households, such as those on television and the internet. In Japan, following the 2008 global financial crisis and the spread of COVID-19 from late 2019, media coverage and social media discussions addressing child poverty and poverty among single-mother households increased. As shown below, participants in both groups expressed resistance to such media representations.

- In recent years, especially since COVID, I've seen so many stories about single-mother households on smartphones and TV. Every time I see such coverage, I feel really resistant. I've always had this strong feeling that I don't want my child to think, "I'm weaker than other people," or "I'm not good enough," just because we're a single-parent family. But every time I watch this kind of news, I feel like single-mother families are portrayed as "not normal" or "problem families." The more I feel that, the more I want to prove, "I can manage." So, I've been working crazy. On weekdays, I work a regular job; on weekends, I do part-time work; and on weeknights, I even do garbage collection. I just want to earn money, I don't want people to look at me and think, "She's a single mother, life must be hard," or "She's worse than others." To be honest, pushing myself like that all the time is a big psychological pressure. (Group 2)

A: You know the media often says that poverty "passes down" or "keeps repeating." Like, if a mother is poor, then the child will be poor too, and the cycle won't stop. I don't really like that way of putting it, that it's a "cycle." I want to break that "cycle," so even if I'm exhausted, I work multiple jobs and do my best to support my child.

B: I get the sense that the media looks at us like, "Single-parent families are poor," right? That's a common trope. When I hear that, I feel like, "Oh, so that's how people see me." (Group 1)

These narratives indicate that media representations of single mothers and single-mother households shaped the participants' self-valuations and actions. They acknowledged that media coverage can draw public attention to child poverty and poverty among single-mother households. However, from the perspective of those being represented, visibility did not necessarily lead to recognition. When single-mother households were repeatedly called "not normal" or "problem families," or associated with a "cycle of poverty," the participants felt that they were seen through deficit-based categories. Such representations could produce stigmatising effects by positioning single mothers as objects of pity, risk, or social failure rather than as subjects with their own voices and claims. The participants' efforts to show that they were "managing properly," sometimes by taking on excessive work, can therefore be understood as an attempt to distance themselves from these stigmatising images.

CONCLUSION

This study drew on narratives from single mothers receiving welfare benefits, collected through two participatory poverty research projects. Their accounts were examined across five settings to analyse social prejudice and discrimination. The results are summarised in Table 4. Given the constraints of the research design and the limited data, this study does not claim that the data are sufficient to allow inference about the full range of constraints or impacts of the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty experienced by people who live with it. Nevertheless, the data do capture and reflect several problems, providing an initial indication of some key issues.

Table 4. Prejudice and discrimination experienced by single mothers receiving welfare benefits through interactions with social others

Life setting	Social others	Forms of remarks or treatment	Relational/symbolic consequences for participants	Social mechanisms
Community	Neighbours	Intrusive questioning and mocking comments about divorce, remarriage, and single-parent family life.	Anger, discomfort	Moralization of divorce through gendered family norms that normalise the two-parent family and interpret divorce as women's failure of endurance.
		Sermonizing comments that blame women for not enduring marriage.	Self-blame accompanied by anger and humiliation	
		Comparisons with two-parent families and assumptions about economic hardship.	Feeling ashamed and marginalised	
Workplace	Colleagues	Overly familiar invitations in a casual and flippant tone.	Discomfort, silence, inability to talk back	Gendered and poverty-based stereotyping that weakens interpersonal boundaries and exposes private life, sexuality, and consumption to inappropriate commentary.
		Mocking comments about consumption, such as purchasing a branded item.	Hurt, humiliation	
Social institutions	Welfare office staff	Dismissive responses when applying alone and respectful responses when accompanied by a supporter.	Powerlessness, frustration	Institutional asymmetry, welfare stigma, and forced exposure of social status through credibility testing, monitoring, and visible administrative procedures.
	Caseworkers	Intrusive questioning about upbringing and family history, together with repeated home visits.	Stress, aversion, anxiety about being exposed	
	Hospital and pharmacy staff	Special procedures, visible documents, and sarcastic reactions during medical access.	Shame, psychological burden, and reluctance to seek health care	
Support organizations	Supporters and organisation staff	Provision of practical support that also makes participants aware of receiving relief.	Complex feelings (gratitude combined with self-consciousness)	Stigmatising compassion in support relationships, where receiving aid or being represented as a "case" can mark participants as needy or pitiful.
		Use of participants' experiences as illustrative cases, followed by unwanted concern from others.	Complex feelings (gratitude combined with distrust and emotional hurt)	
Media	News coverage and articles	Single-mother households are depicted as "not normal," "problem families," "single-mother households are poor," and as part of a "cycle of poverty."	Resistance, intensified and excessive self-effort	Media coverage raises public awareness, but deficit-based portrayals can turn single-mother households into symbols of abnormality, risk, and poverty transmission.

Table 4 illustrates the mechanisms through which single mothers experienced prejudice and discrimination. It traces a series of processes, including how they were treated by social others within social relationships; how single mothers, as those directly concerned, interpreted and experienced these interactions; and how the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty operated through such processes. In doing so, the table analytically presents the central aim of this study: to reveal the broader mechanisms through which poverty operates, beyond material and economic deprivation, and thereby to challenge the narrow understanding of poverty that has persisted in Japan.

First, as noted at the beginning of this article, Lister [5] argues that poverty refers not only to material and economic deprivation but also to relational and symbolic aspects, such as feelings of shame, humiliation, being looked down upon, and powerlessness. From this perspective, the present analysis focused on the prejudice and discrimination experienced by single mothers living in poverty, treating them as key manifestations of these relational and symbolic aspects. The findings show that the constraints or impacts associated with the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty were produced through participants' interactions with social others and shaped by inappropriate perceptions and treatment. In particular, when multiple attributes, such as being poor, female, single, and a mother, overlapped, these burdens and constraints became worse. In this sense, the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty do not merely accompany poverty but can also function as social mechanisms that reinforce it. Although this point has begun to receive attention in Western literature [38], related discussions in Japan remain limited [29]. The present data provide some initial evidence that helps to address this gap.

Second, focusing on the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty revealed how those experiencing it responded to prejudice and discrimination, and their feelings as they endured it. For example, the participants deliberately presented themselves as managing well at work so as not to be seen as struggling or poor. They felt powerless when applying for welfare at municipal offices and, after being dismissed when they went alone, would return with a supporter. They also worked harder to demonstrate that they were managing their lives properly, as a form of resistance to media portrayals that framed single-mother households as abnormal or problematic. Thus, although people living in poverty were constantly subjected to its constraints and impacts, they were not merely passive victims of deprivation. As Lister [5] emphasises, they also exercised agency in responding to and negotiating the conditions imposed on them. The present findings similarly show that the participants exercised agency to the best of their ability in coping with poverty. In the Japanese context, these findings challenge both conservative views that individualise the difficulties faced by single mothers and liberal views that portray them primarily as objects of pity and protection [33].

Third, it can be further argued that several constraints and problems in the relational and symbolic aspects of poverty stemmed from the fact that people living in poverty were not recognised as "full partners in social interaction, able to participate as peers with others in social life" [39], [5], [40]. For instance, in residential communities, they were seen primarily as someone's mother or wife, rather than as individuals. When applying for financial aid for educational expenses, one participant encountered a rule-bound response that left her feeling unable to appeal. Furthermore, frequent home visits and contacts were experienced as a form of surveillance, while special procedures required at hospitals and pharmacies marked the participants as socially different. In support organisations, they could be positioned as people in need of help, while in the media they were often used to illustrate the existence of social problems. Hence, to improve these settings, it is necessary to ensure that single mothers are not viewed primarily as poor and pitiful recipients of welfare benefits and to recognise that income-centred redistribution alone is insufficient. It is necessary to consider the circumstances of those

affected—both material/economic and relational/symbolic—and to respect and recognise them as equal members of civil society with a voice in matters that affect them.

This study's limitations should be noted. It drew on two separate research projects, and the rationale for discussing them together was explained; however, the presentation of the data inevitably remains somewhat dispersed. In addition, participants in both groups were recruited through support organisations and were limited to single mothers receiving welfare benefits. These points limit the empirical scope of the arguments developed in this article. Future research needs to examine how to better incorporate the experiences and perspectives of single mothers who are not connected to such organisations and are more socially isolated, as well as those of people living in poverty who face even more marginalised circumstances. At the same time, the presence of multiple problems should not lead the agents involved to conclude that it is better not to engage with people in poverty. Instead, it underscores the necessity of restructuring engagement methods to improve practices and ensure the dignity of those involved.

Building on these limitations and practical implications, future research and welfare practice should more actively incorporate the perspectives of people living in poverty. As initiatives move forward grounded in "redistribution" and "respect and recognition" [41], [5], the participation of those experiencing poverty is indispensable to realising these practices [42]. As this study has shown, those affected by poverty are, essentially, "experts" on poverty, knowing more than anyone about its realities and the kinds of support they need. Only when they participate in poverty discussions can they become their own representatives and make political claims about the "what" of poverty—whether redistribution or respect and recognition—and how related decisions should be made [33]. Such participation can reframe poverty debates from the perspective of rights and power and foster the development of theories and demands articulated by the very people living in poverty [43]. In this sense, incorporating the voices of those experiencing poverty is not only a methodological issue but also a necessary step towards developing a more generous and just understanding of poverty.

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