

Japan's Vegetable-Eating Men

A nation of suit-wearing salarymen educates its first generation of stay-at-home dads.

Shuichi was 30 years old and working as a systems engineer at a tech company in Tokyo when he was diagnosed with sarcoidosis, an inflammatory disease that triggers growths in the body's major organs. At the time, he had been married for a year, and given that his illness had him bedridden most days and unable to work, he did what he thought was the honorable thing and offered his wife, Kiyoko, a divorce.

“She reprimanded me and said, ‘I will go out to work and earn. You can stay at home and take care of yourself,’” he remembers. At the time, this was unheard of. It was the early 2000s, still very much the Japan of suited salarymen crowding onto trains with their briefcases; women had only been able to pursue careers for about a decade. (Before Japan enacted its Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986, women were often barred from entering career-track jobs.) Even if gender norms had not dictated that men should work and women should look after homes and children, a working woman would not have been able to afford to support her spouse, let alone any children, with the low-paid administrative work or teaching jobs that were available to her.

By 2001, when Shuichi's wife took on the breadwinner role, more opportunities had opened up for women, but the idea of a man being a “househusband” was still outside the mainstream. Men would work grueling 12- to 13-hour days, while women would either stay at home with children or work lower-paid jobs.

At his tech job, Shuichi regularly worked 120 hours a month of overtime. He did not have children at the time, and those who did in his company rarely saw them. The situation had been virtually the same during his own

childhood: his father, who worked as a businessman, was often absent. Kiyoko had had a similar relationship with her salaryman father. Back then, fathers were familiar strangers in a family's home.



The transition wasn't easy when Shuichi first became a "househusband" in the early aughts. His wife had been working as a graphic designer, and she set herself on a path toward promotions and higher pay. At home, Shuichi felt the scrutiny of everyone around him if he went out to the grocery store in the middle of the day. So he dressed up. "For a long time, when I felt well enough to go out I would put on my suit, even just to go to the store or do the dishes," he explains. To be an adult man not in a suit rushing to or from work at the time was to mark oneself as abnormal. The common term for married, unemployed men at the time was *himo*—"string," a derogatory reference to their financial dependence on their wives.

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Wearing a suit while browsing produce, Shuichi was indistinguishable from any other salaryman setting about his daily business in the Tokyo streets. After two years, with his wife's salary increasing, Shuichi made a decision. "I realized that we could increase our overall household 'salary' if I focused on supporting her instead of waiting to cure my disease, or forcing myself to go to work," he says. To mark this turning point, Shuichi made his role as an outcast complete: he dyed his hair blond.

A Japanese man with bleached-blond hair wouldn't necessarily stand out in most Western countries, or even in modern-day Tokyo, but at the time, Shuichi explains, it was a huge symbolic move. "Until then, my thought was to go back into the workforce and back to society," Shuichi says. "But in the public eye, men with blond hair are not allowed to work or even permitted to search for jobs as a salaryman. I became defiant and that is when I basically declared myself a 'househusband.'"



Japan had a plummeting birth rate in the early 2000s, an aging population (the country now boasts the oldest population in the world), and—thanks to the combination of low birth rates and tight immigration policies—a growing labor shortage. This prompted the government to turn its attention to an underutilized labor force: women.

The government's assumption had long been that women and their careers were the root cause of declining birth rates, a belief shared by American conservatives: if women work, the thinking goes, then they may postpone marriage and childbearing, or opt out altogether. Despite the lifting of the government's ban on career-track jobs for women in the mid-80s, companies continued to pay women far less than their male counterparts, promote women less, and funnel mothers into underpaid part-time jobs. (Japan ranks 114th in the world in economic participation and opportunity for women.)

In 2005, the Japanese government began looking for ways to make motherhood more appealing to working women, sending ministers to Scandinavia and France to bring home generous maternity- and paternity-leave policies and a blueprint for government-subsidized day care. Nothing seemed to work. Although the number of women in management in Japan began to inch up, the birth rate continued to drop.

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As government officials began to meet with researchers throughout the country trying to understand why, it became clear that they'd been focusing on the wrong gender. To the extent that women found motherhood unappealing, it wasn't because of their jobs so much as the lack of involvement of their male partners.

“Men—fathers—needed to be doing more housework and childcare,” says Masako Ishii-Kuntz, a professor and fatherhood researcher at Ochanomizu University in Tokyo. As someone who had been studying Japanese fathers for more than 20 years by the time the government came knocking in

2006, Ishii-Kuntz knew that Japanese men were spending about an hour a week on childcare and household duties, while women were spending 30 to 40 hours a week, numbers that had not shifted as the country had become more dependent on women's labor outside the home. But that story wasn't as simple as just "those lazy men who don't want to help out around the house," either. When the Ministry of Labor surveyed working fathers in 2008 it found that a third of them wanted to spend more time with their kids and wanted to take paternity leave, but felt that it would be frowned upon by their bosses: for the older generation, spending time with children was just not something men did.



In 2008, the Japanese government began piloting the Ikumen Project, aimed at drafting policies that would make workplaces more father-friendly and funding various cultural projects that would encourage dads throughout Japan to get more involved with their children. (The word *ikumen* is an amalgam of the Japanese *ikuji*, “child-rearing,” and the English “men.”) Signs began to appear in subways and on crowded streets: an American-inspired, movie-poster-style billboard of an actor dressed in a

Superman costume, standing proudly with the word “Ikumen” emblazoned on his chest. Men could be seen actually engaging in fatherhood on TV and in films and magazines, too. The popular manga-turned-movie *Bunny Drop* (also known as *Usagi Drop*), for example, centers on office worker Daikichi Kawachi, who becomes an ikumen when he adopts his grandfather’s six-year-old illegitimate daughter. Every year the Ikumen Project would anoint a handful of celebrities (comedians, actors, and pop stars) “ikumen of the year.”

Around the same time, in 2009, advertising agency Dentsu Inc. coined the word *papadanshi*—fathers who are “highly motivated in child-rearing” (*kosodate ni iyokuteki*)—and positioned such fathers as drivers of the child-rearing market. In much the same way that Americans began seeing more and more “man” versions of various beauty and grooming products appearing on shelves from 2009 to 2015, Japanese markets saw the emergence of baby and kid products geared toward dads—bubble bath targeted at dads, dad-friendly baby carriers and strollers, even an entire magazine devoted to cool dads, all marketed with lines like “This product was suited to papas” (*Papa ga tsukatte yokatta*) and “Even papas can use this!” (*Papa de mo tsukaeru!*).

Shuichi had finally found a tribe. By 2012, he was not just a househusband but a stay-at-home dad too, father to one son, and in 2015 he began meeting up regularly with a group of other stay-at-home dads called Secret Society, Friends of House Husbands (*Himitsu Kessha Shufu no Tomo*). They consider themselves a step above ikumen, explains Shuichi, whose son is now six years old. “In terms of being proactive in the household, we consider ikumen to be passive,” he says. “Ikumen is a part-time employee, whereas the househusband is a full-time employee who takes on a dedicated role.”

Feminist scholars have taken issue with the language, ads, and media around ikumen, which tend to portray involved dads as heroic and situate

fatherhood as something patriotic in the same way that the government encouraged men to work hard for the good of the nation as it struggled after World War II. In a chapter on ikumen in the 2017 book *Cool Japanese Men*, University of Cambridge graduate student Hannah Vassallo writes, “Most notable here is the likening of ikumen to superheroes—hypermasculine icons who serve the nation through protecting the weak (children and mothers); and frame their roles more in terms of ‘support’, ‘consideration’ and ‘understanding’ for their wives—a sympathetic, but somewhat passive fathering model, leaving the gendered division of labor largely intact.”

Still, Vassallo goes on to say that the emergence of ikumen in Japan is promising evidence of a broader cultural shift. By 2015, slightly more men were taking advantage of the ikumen policies: The percentage of men who took paternity leave (up to 12 months, paid for by the government) increased from 1.9 percent in 2012 to nearly 3 percent in 2015, and then to 7 percent in 2017. (The government wants to see it hit 13 percent by 2020.) Some dads were beginning to leave work early—by Japanese standards, about 6 p.m. instead of 11 p.m.—and the number of stay-at-home dads, although still distinctly a fringe minority, was growing. But the disconnect between the number of men wanting to take advantage of family-friendly policies and those actually taking advantage, what Ishii-Kuntz describes as the “disconnect between context and conduct,” persisted. “They still mostly have bosses who think these policies are really strange,” she explains. “They worry that if they take paternity leave or they leave early, they’ll be penalized in some way.”

In other words, while expectations that they be more involved at home had changed, men’s work requirements hadn’t. Just as the culture was expecting women to simply add work on top of full-time childcare and housework duties, men were being asked to just add involved parenting to an already-long—60 hours, in some cases—workweek.



Enter the IkuBoss. In 2015, the government launched a program targeted at shifting the workaholic mind-set of employers and bosses. Emerging alongside Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s “work-style reform” proposal—which aims to decouple employees’ salaries from the number of hours they work, put a cap on overtime hours at 720 hours a year, and require companies to pay “regular” and “irregular” employees the same rate for the same work—IkuBoss intends to change the culture of work from the top down. (The prime minister’s proposal just made its way through the lower house of Japan’s parliament and is expected to pass by the end of this parliament’s session, which was extended to the end of July.)

To take part in the IkuBoss Corporate Alliance, companies must make a public commitment, then send executives to classes and workshops (conducted by the nonprofit Fathering Japan, which has been instrumental in the Ikumen Project and also runs a network of dad groups throughout the country), publicize their successes and meet and connect with other IkuBoss companies to share best practices, and then, if needed, bring on professional consultants (provided by the IkuBoss program) to address any outstanding issues.

So far, 184 companies have signed on to the program. That’s not a large number in a country with tens of thousands of businesses, but Makiko Tachimori, vice-chair of the Women in Business Committee of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan, says it’s important that some of the early adopters have been large firms. “In Japan, it’s the big companies that really shift the culture,” she says. “They only represent 5 percent of the companies, but whatever they do, the medium and smaller companies follow, and the government too, so we need to see all of them embracing this.”

Tachimori points out that the IkuBoss program’s encouraging of

management to be more flexible about employees' family-caregiving needs doesn't always refer to childcare. "Because there's a growing need for elderly care, because Japan is the fastest-aging society in the whole world, even men have to chip in for elder care," she says. "So, it's not just women and children anymore, it's men who also have to take absent from work to take care of their parents."

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The IkuBoss program has gone well so far, with large companies like Shiseido making big public announcements. "It's all very positive, but it's too early to tell what the overall impact will be," Tachimori says. Critics of Abe's "work-style reform" plan worry that it won't actually reduce overtime hours, just overtime pay, which could ultimately exacerbate the work-life imbalance and that pesky birth rate problem—Japanese economists have recently been talking in the country's newspapers about what anyone who lives in any developed country already knows: reproductive decisions are heavily influenced by economic stability. In the same decades that the birth rate has been declining in Japan, the number of "regular" jobs (stable, full-time jobs with benefits) has also declined, creating a large number of men who worry that they can't afford a family. That's layered on top of the long-standing cultural notion that the proper order of a man's life is: job, marriage, kid.

"When you are hired as a regular employee in Japan, you are hired for life," says Tachimori. "Traditionally the management mind-set was like this:

everybody works at the same company for their lifetime, lifetime employment is normal, the seniority system is normal, you don't have to understand about childcare or housework because stay-at-home moms will take care of that. That's the old mind-set of management."

At a prelaunch interview about the IkuBoss program in April 2014, Masako Mori, Japan's minister for gender equality and the declining birth rate (in case there was any doubt the government sees these issues as intertwined), explained that Japanese companies need to move beyond just adopting policies that support working parents. They have to actually encourage employees to take advantage of those policies and make it clear that they will not be penalized for doing so. "Just because there's a company-wide system in place, it doesn't mean people feel able to say they're going to take time off," Mori said. "So, we will have the bosses encourage them to do it: 'Your kid is small, so go home early. The others will take up the slack.'"

"I am ikuman!" Kiyonori Yamashita (who goes by Kiyō) tells me proudly over dinner with his son Seiji and wife Lara. Elbowing each other and giggling throughout the meal, 40-year-old Kiyō and his 10-year-old son are clearly close. He's one of the hundreds of thousands of dads across the country who now regularly show up at their son's soccer games, something Ako Martin tells me she's noticed since moving back to Japan to open up her tour-guide company. "You definitely wouldn't see dads at anything when I was a kid in the 1980s," she says.

Kiyō tells me later that he thinks he's been able to be more involved with his son in part because Lara, who is from Ireland, expects him to be. "Maybe it's because I have a Western wife," he says. "If I had Japanese wife, I might expect her to look after my son. Japanese mentality is that the mother is the main person to look after the kids, in general."

Tachimori says that while this idea that women take care of children and homes while men run companies has dominated modern history in Japan,

there have been noticeable shifts in the past decade. “Every year I see more and more fathers taking care of their children. On the street or in a TV drama or in the media. You can see men doing fatherhood more and more all the time, so that is very encouraging. Those are the men in their 30s. Men and women in their 30s have a totally different mind-set than people in their 50s. They are different people. So we have high hopes for the younger generation.”

Ishii-Kuntz echoes this, noting the increased number of men out with children on the streets, a visible shift from decades past when men would only really be seen in suits rushing to or from work and children would only be seen with women. “You even see a lot more men in suits carrying babies, that’s a big shift,” she says.

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Tachimori explains that, in addition to working to shift the mind-sets of older bosses at companies, really shaking things up in Japan will require changes in schools and neighborhoods too. And grandparents are likely to remain an obstacle. “We still have a lot of elderly women who never worked in their whole lives, and now they have become house-grandmothers,” she says. “And we have so many men, too, who were never ikumen, never did housework in their whole lives, never did childcare, and now they’re grandfathers. And I still hear from a lot of career-focused young women who are struggling with their grandparents because those grandmothers and grandfathers say they feel sorry for their grandchild

because mother is working. I personally experienced the same exact thing. My mother-in-law used to tell me every weekend when we went to dinner at their house, talking to my daughter saying, ‘Lisa-chan I feel sorry for you because you cannot eat very well because your mom is working.’”

The greatest hope for cultural progress may well lie, as it usually does, with those on the fringes. The men like Shuichi, whom the mainstream has long dismissed as “househusbands” or, as Ishii-Kuntz tells me, “vegetable-eating men,” who are often compared to (or paired up with) “meat-eating [career] women.” Not only are such men a large part of what has enabled Japan to dramatically increase the workforce participation of women in recent years (after lagging behind most developed countries since 2000, Japan shot past the US last year, with 76 percent of women now part of the labor force), but domestic bliss is increasingly becoming a viable alternative for those men who find themselves unable to secure a high-paying full-time job.

“It used to be that I would ask my students [all women] about these men, and they would all wrinkle their noses and say, you know, ‘I don’t know about those guys, they’re not very masculine,’” Ishii-Kuntz tells me of her students, all training to be home economics teachers at Ochanomizu University in Tokyo. “But in the last year or two, I don’t know, it’s really changed. I’d say about half of them are actually really looking for a vegetable-eating man.”