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Single fathers emerge from the shadows

Overlooked by society for years, more men are raising kids alone

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[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | AUG 20, 2014

Hiroki Yoshida, a father of three children aged 6, 8 and 11, suddenly became a single father four years ago, when his wife walked out without warning.

He was so shocked he cried for two weeks straight.

“I couldn’t get her off my mind for the next two weeks, but then I thought to myself I had to face reality for the sake of the children,” said Yoshida, 37, in an interview with The Japan Times at his four-bedroom apartment in Konosu, Saitama Prefecture. Yoshida did not move his family after his wife left.

Although it took him a while to get his feelings sorted out and file for divorce, he now feels he can move forward with his new life with his children, especially since becoming officially single again last year.

Yoshida says he bears his ex-wife no ill will in spite of everything. Her parents both died when she was in elementary school, he says, and she had a tendency to fall into depression. She got deeply involved in a questionable “self-discovery” group awareness training seminar and then in a pyramid scheme, he says, and ended up running off with a man she met at one of the seminars.

Although he tried desperately to pull her back in to the family, his ex-wife’s feelings never returned, he said. But after intensive negotiations, the children now see their mother on a regular basis.

The number of single-parent families is on the rise in Japan, along with the growing number of divorces.

According to the internal affairs ministry, 204,000 families were headed by a single father in 2010, up sharply from 166,000 in 2005.

But there were only 90,000 cases in which the children were living exclusively with their father, in a household with no other relatives such as grandparents.

Single fathers fly under the radar compared to single mothers, who are still more common.

Single fathers also, on average, earn more than single mothers, who tend to struggle more financially as a result. A traditionally patriarchal society also discourages fathers from opening up about their problems, and getting help.

Though they might make more money, single fathers must contend with the attitude of employers who view them as the main breadwinner and free from child-rearing duties. Often expected to put in longer hours, they are burdened both at work and at home, making it hard to strike a good work-life balance.

However, a recent law revision highlights how the situation is gradually changing.

Since 2010, single fathers, like single mothers, have been eligible for child-rearing subsidies offered to low-income earners.

Akemi Morita, professor and dean of the sociology department at Toyo University in Tokyo's Bunkyo Ward, said isolation is the biggest problem facing single fathers.

Society is not yet set up to allow working men to get fully involved in child rearing, and support services for working fathers and their families are few and far between, according to Morita.

“Issues for single fathers include gaining more support from employers. Single-father families, like any other families with challenges (for example, families with a child with special needs), should be given special considerations, such as flexibility in working hours according to their circumstances. For example, they should be able to work flexible hours to leave time to tend to the child, or easily take time off work when the child falls ill,” said Morita.

She points out single-father families that cannot get enough help from their relatives need “one-stop” services where children can stay for a few hours, play with caretakers, or speak their mind to someone.

Morita said that in some countries, like the United States, single-parent families can get support from members of their religious, social or ethnic group.

“But for the Japanese, such support rarely exists, so single-parent households — especially those of single fathers — tend to get isolated more easily,” she said.

Tomoyuki Katayama, founder and former director of Zenfushiren (short for Zenkoku Fushi Katei Shien Renrakukai, or Single Father Japan), points out that men generally find it difficult to ask for help. The group, founded in 2009, was the first support group for single fathers in Japan.

“Normally, men don't want to talk about things that don't have a solution or conclusion — problems such as not having money but not being in an environment to be able to increase their income, or not having time to do housework but don't have an (immediate) solution. Thus,

single fathers tend to solve these problems by themselves,” he said.

Katayama says that he and a few other single fathers felt frustrated that single-father families could not receive enough financial support from the government in the past.

Thus, Zenfushiren, with backing from other nonprofit groups that support single fathers, such as Fathering Japan, appealed to the government for support. Out of this came the 2010 legal amendment.

Niigata-based Katayama is a single father of two children. He says he was a workaholic until his ex-wife left 10 years ago.

After changing jobs several times, he quit his office job and became a freelance consultant a few years ago, offering support to single-parent families and couples with problems.

Katayama, 42, says although not all the problems fathers face are the same, most of the ones he knows complain of not having enough time or money.

“There’s a limit to how much a single father can do, juggling housework, child rearing and career. As a result, some single fathers get depressed, and even have to quit their jobs,” he said.

Yoshida, the father of three, was an editor at a publishing company when his wife left him. He had feature stories to handle every month, and the heavy workload made it difficult for him to juggle child rearing and the job.

Yoshida, like Katayama, recently became a freelancer, and is now thinking of starting up an ecologically minded social services business for fathers.

He also takes part in community activities, serving as the representative of his children’s parent-teacher association, and carrying a “mikoshi” (portable shrine) in the local festival.

Yoshida says that he has always been a good dad, cooking and playing with the children every day, so it hasn’t been too troublesome to start anew as a single father. He says what helped him was that all three children sleep very well at night, and don’t long for their mother when she is not there.

With lots of laundry fluttering in the wind on the apartment’s veranda, and a pile of dishes drying next to the kitchen sink, it’s easy to imagine how hectic a life Yoshida is leading.

But his face looks peaceful as he shows off a handmade bag that he has sewn for his 8-year-old daughter to take to school.

“I’m naturally optimistic, you know,” he said, adding that he has more space in his mind now to think about the future.

“I want to find something that I really want to do in my life, and keep on moving forward,” he said with a smile.

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