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Women and Japan's New Poor

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By J Sean Curtin

A Japanese government survey published in early 2005 estimates that the number of fatherless families has skyrocketed, hitting 1.22 million in fiscal 2003. This is the highest number ever recorded and represents a 28.3% increase from the previous survey conducted five years earlier (see note 1 for full survey details). The figures also show that the vast majority of children in these households live far below the poverty line, creating a rapidly expanding underclass of impoverished families.

The new Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry data highlight the failure of government policy to address the important social changes that have occurred over the past decade, particularly the steep rise in divorces, many involving children. Although the divorce rate has recently declined slightly reaching peak levels in 2002, numbers remain extremely high for Japan.

1. Number of Divorces and Divorce Rate 1990-2004

Year	Number of Divorces	Divorce Rate Per 1000 of Population
1990	157,608	1.28
1991	168,969	1.37
1992	179,191	1.45
1993	188,297	1.52
1994	195,106	1.57
1995	199,016	1.60
1996	206,955	1.66
1997	222,635	1.78
1998	243,183	1.94
1999	250,529	2.00
2000	264,246	2.10
2001	285,917	2.27
2002	289,838	2.30
2003	283,854	2.25
2004	about 267,000	(not yet available)

Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2005

Over the past decade, low wages for women, a non-functional child support payment system, an inadequate social welfare policy, and a weakening of traditional family support networks all have contributed to redrawing the Japanese poverty map. Previously, elderly households constituted the bulk of the poor, but today the balance has firmly shifted to mother-headed families.

Most lone mothers and their children now live in poverty, with many experiencing real hardship. In 2001, the average annual income of a lone-mother family was about 2.52 million yen (US$23,850). The latest data estimate that this fell to just 2.12 million yen in fiscal 2002, far below median figure. In 2000, the average household income was about 6.17 million yen,

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and for an elderly household the figure was 3.19 million yen.

Some low-income families are experiencing such extreme poverty that there have even been a few rare cases of mothers and children dying from malnutrition. One recent case was reported at the beginning of February 2005 when a 27-year-old mother and her three-year-old son were found starved to death in their apartment in Saitama Prefecture near Tokyo. Police reported that there was no food in the apartment and the woman only had eight yen ($0.07) in her purse.

An unmarried mother living on a very low income in snowy northern Japan commented: "It is hardest to manage in winter because of heating costs, especially this year. I try to stay at work for as long as possible because it's warm there and my son is in a well-heated day care center. For mothers like me day care is free, so it is best he is there for as long as possible. At home, we stay in one room and wear blankets to keep warm." She added, "Ever since I read about the mother whose baby froze to death because she could not pay for electricity, I feel so worried."

International research has shown that in developed countries the three primary causes of single-mother poverty are low wages, non-payment of child support money by absent fathers, and inadequate social provisions, such as welfare programs, tax credits for poor families, free child care for poor mothers or other systems in which the state transfers resources to them. By Western European, but not American, standards, Japan is seriously deficient in all three categories, creating an environment in which poverty is now keenly felt, and in which poverty levels are almost certain to increase.

The latest government sponsored survey calculates that 83% of lone mothers are working, compared with an average of about 86% for the previous decade. The employment rates of Japanese lone mothers are the highest in the industrialized world, although in recent years they have decreased slightly due to the long recession and tight job market. While labor force participation rates stay high, average wage levels have remained extremely low. This is because Japan has a widening gender-based wage gap, and in recent years there has been a proliferation of low-paid non-standard forms of employment, the kind of work in which many lone mothers are engaged. According to the latest Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry employment survey, which is conducted every four years, in 2003, part-time and temporary workers comprised 34.6 percent of Japan's workforce, up 7.1 percentage points from 1999.

Flawed Child support system

Non-payment of child support by absent fathers is one of the main causes of poverty for families headed by women, especially in Japan. According to the latest government survey, only 34% of divorced mothers had functioning support payment agreements with their children's fathers.

The Japanese child support system is deficient in several key areas: most crucially there is no effective mechanism for enforcing payments or collecting arrears.

The courts normally do not take action if a delinquent father fails to meet his obligations. Basically, if a father reneges on an agreement, most mothers can do very little about it unless they are wealthy enough to pursue the matter through Japan's notoriously slow, time-consuming and expensive legal system. Even then, if the mother wins, the courts can only legally force a father to pay a quarter of the originally agreed monthly child support payments. Since payments are extremely low compared to the cost of living, this acts as yet another disincentive for seeking legal redress.

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The current system leaves mothers and children at the mercy of fathers, who face no real penalties for nonpayment.

To try to tackle the problem, the law was revised in April 2003 with the supposed aim of requiring divorced fathers to pay child support, but the half-hearted amendment has had zero impact. In fact, the situation has deteriorated, as the average monthly maintenance payment five years ago was 53,200 yen and in the new survey it is only 44,660 yen, a decrease of 8,540 yen or 16%.

All past attempts to effectively amend the law have been derailed by a vocal group of conservative male lawmakers who claim that making men liable to pay for divorced children would go against so-called "Japanese traditions".

High divorce rates

The latest survey shows that 80% of female-headed households resulted from divorce. At present about 978,500 households are fatherless due to marital breakup, representing an increase of 49.7% from the previous four-yearly study. There are even more mother-headed families than these figures indicate as some of families live with relatives and are included in their households. In 2003, a government agency estimated that there were about 1,225,400 families with absent fathers in Japan.

Nationwide, the number of such families in fiscal 2003 accounted for 2.7% of the country's 45.8 million families. The number of unmarried mothers remained relatively low, at about 70,500, up 2% from the previous survey. However, over the past decade divorce rates have shot up, bringing current Japanese divorce levels in line with European Union averages, although lagging behind U.S. levels. In 2004 there were about 267,000 divorces in Japan compared to 283,854 in 2003. While the actual numbers decreased, so did marriages, so not much has changed.

2. International Comparison of Divorce

Country	Year	Divorce Rate per 1000 people
Italy	2000	0.7
Greece	2000	0.9
Portugal	2000	1.9
Netherlands	2001	2.1
Japan	2003	2.3
France	2000	2.4
Germany	2000	2.4
Sweden	2000	2.4
Denmark	1999	2.5
U.K.	2000	2.6
Belgium	2000	2.6
Switzerland	2000	2.8
United States	2002	4.0

Sources: European Commission 2004 and Ministry
of Health, Labour and Welfare (Japan), 2005

Jeff Kingston, a professor at Temple University Japan and author of Japan's Quiet Transformation, explained, "The problem in Japan is that higher divorce rates lead to a higher incidence of poverty, and a lot of women are working; these two facts have not yet caught up with social policy." He added, "Policies have generally been based on a false assumption of stable families with one breadwinner."

Kingston also said, "The problem is that the ideology of the strong, stable, secure family with the husband who is the breadwinner with a secure job does not match the reality. Thus, the policies that are currently in place are

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clearly inadequate."

Poor children lose out to the elderly

By European Union standards, Japan, like the US, has meager social welfare provisions for poor families. Critics argue that at present Japanese welfare policy focuses far too much on the elderly at the expense of other needy groups, such as children living in poverty. Despite a sharp increase in the number of children experiencing economic hardship, social welfare policy continues to be almost exclusively oriented towards the elderly, a phenomenon also observed in the US. Many political commentators say this is for electoral reasons in light of the formidable and growing electoral power of the elderly.

In August 2002, the government reduced welfare allowances for needy children and has since initiated a series of austerity measures. Osawa Machiko, a professor at Japan Woman's University, commented, "Alarmingly, they are now tightening the conditions for receiving welfare, making them even stricter. I think they make these assumptions in the belief that the 'family' can take care of these social needs."

Osawa said there is an imbalance in the way the state distributes resources to various needy groups. "If you look at the way the social welfare budget is allocated, and this is probably because of the aging society, a huge proportion of the money is designated for the elderly. The social security budget seems to be driven by the needs of the elderly and there is no innovation for the changing needs of society."

However, Maya Yoshio, a professor at Nihon University Graduate School, who also advises the Japanese government, rejected this argument as well as comparisons between Japanese single mothers and their EU counterparts. He said Japanese welfare priorities are correct and that it is right to focus on the elderly. "In Japan it is easier for this group of mothers to get a part-time job and the level of remuneration they receive for such work is not so bad. Therefore, the living standard of single-mothers is not so poor and they can manage on an adequate economic level. Also, the average number of children these Japanese mothers have to care for is comparatively low, usually one or two children."

If current policy does not change, and Maya's comments is but one of many signs that it may not, the number of children living in poverty seems almost certain to increase still further. If family support networks continue to weaken and divorce rates remain high, a great many more vulnerable families will find themselves living way below the poverty line.

Kanami's Case

The following case study of the subject I call Kanami graphically illustrates how utterly inadequate the current Japanese child support payment system is towards mothers and children. This case study comes from a long-term, currently ongoing, research project that was initiated in 1992 (for more details see note 2).

Kanami's husband abandoned her and their three children and refused to pay anything towards their upkeep. Her case clearly demonstrates that present arrangements work entirely to the father's advantage and helps explain why mother-headed families make up a majority of the poorest households in Japan.

All names in the following account have been changed.

How the Child Support System Failed Kanami and her Children

Kanami was 18 years old when she became a mother. She married straight after graduating from high school, giving birth to her first son

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six months later. Her husband was seven years her senior and worked as a self-employed plumber. He abandoned his previous wife and two children to marry the youthful and inexperienced Kanami.

About a year and a half after the first son was born, Kanami gave birth to a second boy. She found motherhood stressful and felt her husband was too domineering. As she was much younger than other mothers in the neighborhood, and had no work experience, she felt a little isolated and inferior in their company.

Because her husband was self-employed, his income was erratic and this caused considerable stress within their relationship. Two and a half years after her second son was born, she gave birth to a third boy. She had hoped that the arrival of the new baby might improve the marital situation, but the relationship continued to deteriorate. Kanami suspected that her husband was having a relationship with another woman. Just over two years after their third child was born, the couple broke up.

The father moved into an apartment in a different part of town and started living with a 19-year-old woman. This relationship eventually produced a child. Kanami and the children were forced to move into her mother's home.

Her ex-husband refused to pay any child maintenance money to Kanami for any of his three children. Although the law obliges a father to make such payments, there is no effective mechanism for forcing delinquent fathers to do so. Kanami's former partner had also never paid a penny for the upkeep of his two children from his first marriage.

In December 1992, six years after the breakup, Kanami still felt angry. She explained, "My husband left us to marry a younger woman. He still lives nearby, but refuses to pay any money for the boys. The local authorities have asked him, but he refuses and they say there is nothing they can do. It seems so unfair that he can just abandon us like this and get away with it."

It appears her ex-partner had learnt from his first marriage that if you got fed up with your wife and children, you could simply abandon them without incurring any financial penalties. This is exactly what he did to Kanami. His actions clearly illustrate the woeful inadequacies of the current Japanese system and how it can be exploited by delinquent fathers.

Employment opportunities limited for lone mothers

Because Kanami had no employment history and three children to care for, finding work was difficult. Her mother helped with child care arrangements and she had a succession of low paid jobs in factories and restaurants.

When I first met her in September 1992, she was working in a local factory. At that time her eldest son was 12, the second 10 and the youngest 8. They survived on a very meager income and lived in a dilapidated old house that belonged to a relative.

In 1993, Kanami landed a job at a school lunch centre, where she prepared food. It was only on certain occasions, such as when a child was sick, that mothering concerns superseded economic imperatives. For example, when her youngest son had an asthma attack, she immediately took time off work. When her children were sick, her financial situation was always extremely difficult because of lost earnings.

In February 1993, Kanami discussed her feeling about the conflict between work and mothering. "When your children are sick, you have to be there for them. You can't be at work.

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That is why I am so lucky with my job. Mr. Tanaka [the manager] understands my situation. ... The other women also know what it means to be a mother, even though they are all older."

One of the reasons she had taken up this employment in the first place was that she knew the head of the school lunch centre was sympathetic towards her situation, allowing her time-off when her children were sick. Another factor was that the place of employment was both near her home and relatively near the children's schools. In her previous job, she could not take time off in this fashion and this caused her a lot of distress. Fortunately, her mother had been able to look after the children during this period.

Taking up a new position also offered Kanami a possible chance for advancement. If she obtained a nutritionist license, she would qualify for a higher salary scale. This had encouraged her to study for the license. She did not see possible advancement in terms of career development, but purely for its potential financial yield. A food science qualification would increase the family income.

Although she felt quite comfortable with her job and life in the town where she was living, worries about her children's senior high school education eventually led her to relocate to one of Hokkaido's largest cities, where they could attend better schools. In less urban areas the choice of a senior high school is limited and often the ranking of these schools is low.

Planning for the move began in 1994, a year before her eldest son was due to graduate from junior high school. A relative in City Z was able to arrange an apartment and job. In March 1995, the whole family relocated to City Z and her eldest son entered a technical high school in April of that year.

Kanami succeeded in getting into another school lunch center, but despite her best efforts made little progress with her studies towards obtaining a license. She was, on the whole, happier to be in a larger city as it offered more social opportunities. She also felt freer as she had no driver's license and the larger city's public transport was much better than in her hometown. Her second son decided to study nursing and later entered a vocational high school specializing in nursing.

In an interview conducted in May 2001, she reflected on her new life in the city. "It is much better for the boys' education to be here, there is much more choice and they have a chance for a better future. Also, for me there is a better selection of jobs. In some ways, I like it here, but I wish I did not have to live such a distance from my mother. She encouraged me to come here, but I miss her.…Financially, things are just about manageable. Because there is more choice here, I can save money when I go shopping, so the money goes further...There are more things to do here and I can go out in the evening sometimes."

In 2002, her second son, who was then 20-years-old, got a young woman pregnant. The two had known each since junior high school days and were both originally from the same town. The couple were railroaded into marriage by the 19 year old girl's parents, who helped arrange employment for their new son-in-law in their hometown. The local government offered the young father a clerical position and he soon settled down in his new role. The town was suffering from a declining population and welcomed the new family. He was still working in the same position in January 2005 and by then had a second child.

Kanami was uneasy about becoming a grandmother and initially felt a little uncomfortable with her new status. In February 2003, she told me, "Who expects to be a grandmother at my age? I certainly did not think I would ever become a grandmother so

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young." After the initial shock, she gradually adapted to life with a new title.

I last interviewed her in January 2005. She was still working at the meal centre and uncertain about her future. Now free of her mothering duties, she had formed a relationship with a man a few years older than herself. Her eldest and youngest sons were living in the same city and both had steady jobs. None of her offspring had gone to university because of financial constraints.

During the interview she summed up her thoughts about the situation of single-mothers and the child support payment system. She said, "How can it be right that a man can just leave his children and nobody [in authority] does anything. The problem is all the [official] people you have to ask [for help] are men and you feel they do not really understand you because they are men. In Japan, the world is created by men for men.…Until that changes we have no real rights."

Reflecting on her life she said, "The situation for divorced mothers is still just as bad as when my marriage broke up. Things remain completely in the man's favour. It makes you wonder if things will ever improve?"

Notes

1. The Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry interviewed 3,792 households randomly selected from those in the 2000 census. From this group it estimated that there are now 1,225,400 fatherless families in Japan. The data was collected in November 2003 and released near the end of January 2005. Earlier national surveys on mother-headed households put their numbers at 789,900 in 1993 and at 954,900 in 1998. In the survey, a single-mother or lone-mother household was defined as one where the father is absent and the divorced, separated, widowed or unmarried mother lives with a child, or children, under the age of 20.
2. This case study comes from a long-term, ongoing, research project that was initiated in 1992. It consists of interviews and life-histories of 14 lone-mothers located all over Hokkaido and is updated each year. The author used personal acquaintances and informants to be introduced to the lone-mothers who make up this long-term project. It is acknowledged that the relatively small sample size, confined to Hokkaido, limits the findings of this study. However, it is hoped that this small scale study, in conjunction with local and national data, will offer insight into the challenges facing poor lone-mothers in today's Japan.

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