

## **Supporting Single Parents; Especially Women**

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This paper is the transcript of a speech given at a parallel event held on March 14, 2024.

### **Introduction**

Hello, everyone. My name is Fumiko Kambara, a sociologist from Japan, and I have been researching and studying family issues, especially marital relationships, domestic violence and single parents, for many years. I look forward to working with you.

Today, I will be speaking on the topic of “Supporting Single parents; especially women”. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask me after finishing my talk.

Today’ contents are as follows:

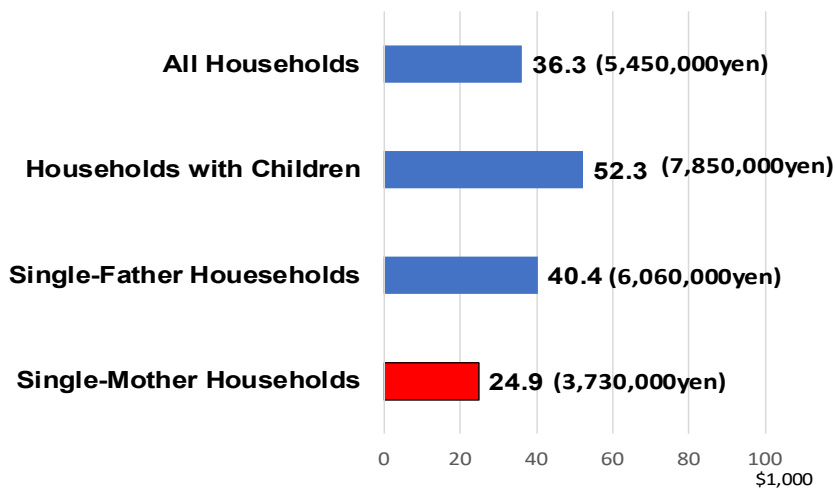
1. Situations in Single-Parent Households in Japan.
2. Mechanisms for Impoverishment of Single Parents.
3. Social Exclusion and Tough Lives of Single Parents.
4. What Support is Really Necessary for Single Parents?
5. Need for an Inclusive Social Model.

### **1. Actual Situation of Single-Parent Households in Japan**

The first topic is the actual situation of single-parent households in Japan.

Fig.1.1 shows the average income for various types of households.

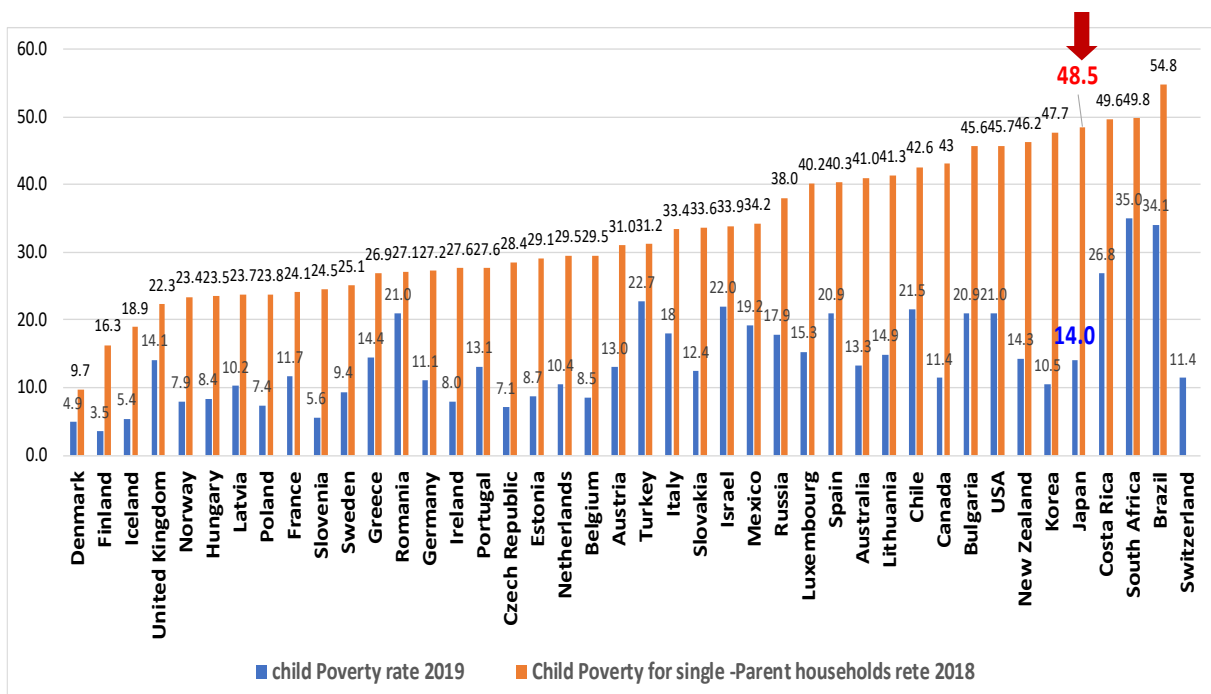
Fig.1.1 Average Income per Household for various Types of Households



Note: Data from the 2022 National Survey of Living Standards  
Below: \$ 1=150yen (As of February 15, 2024)

The average for households with children is \$52.3 thousands (7,850,000 yen). On the other hand, the average for single-mother households is \$24.9 thousands (3,730,000 yen), which is only about 47% of all households with children.

Fig.1.2 compares child poverty rates in OECD countries.



Note: Relative poverty in Japan: The Ratio Under 1,270,000 yen (\$8,467) per Person in 2018  
Average Salary per Person: 4,430,000 yen (\$29,500) in 2021

<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>

The blue bar shows the general child poverty rate, and the orange bar shows the child poverty rate for single-parent households.

The red arrow indicates the data for Japan. Japan's general child poverty rate is 14%, which is around average among OECD countries, but the child poverty rate for single-parent households is 48.5%, which is extremely high among OECD countries.

Table1.1 describes an overview of the living conditions of single-parent households in Japan.

Table1-1 The Living Conditions of Single-Parent Households in Japan in 2021

| Actual Living Conditions of Single-Parent Households in Japan 2021                                | Mother and Children Household<br>(1,195,128 Households) |  | Father and Children Household<br>(148,711 Households) |   |
|---|---|--|---|---|
|   | Bereavement<br>5.3%                                     | Divorce 79.5%<br>Unmarried<br>Mother 10.8%                         | Bereavement<br>21.3%                                  | Divorce 69.7%<br>Unmarried Father<br>1.0%                         |
| Current Age of Parent   | 47.4years old   | 41.6years old  | 49.8years old   | 45.7years old   |
| Age of Youngest Child in Single-Parent Household  | 12.6years old   | 11.2years old  | 13.4years old   | 12.9years old   |
| Household Composition, Single Parent and Children Only  | 65.9%   | 64.6%  | 61.0%   | 51.5%   |
| Average Number of Household Members   | 3.21persons   | 3.20persons  | 3.27persons   | 3.47persons   |
| Owner-Occupied House Rate   | 69.6%   | 32.6%  | 71.9%   | 64.9%   |
| Parents' Regular Employment, Exective, or Self-Employed Before Becoming a Single-Parent Household | 24.9%   | 32.6%  | 94.2%   | 90.1%   |
| Regular Employment, Exective, or Self-Employed Parent Rate  | 34.2%   | 48.2%  | 88.2%   | 79.5%   |
| Irregular Employed Parent of a Single-Parent Household  | 44.9%   | 36.1%  | 2.7%  | 6.4%  |
| Unemployed Parent Rate  | 11.9%   | 8.9%   | 2.7%  | 5.5%  |
| Average Annual Working Income   | 2.16million yen   | Divorce<br>2.40million yen<br>Unmarried Mother<br>2.09million yen  | 6.16million yen                                       | Divorce 4.55million yen<br>Unmarried Father 3.13million yen       |
| Average Annual Household Income<br>Note : Household with Children 8.135million yen                | 3.71million yen   | Divorce<br>3.63 million yen<br>Unmarried Mother<br>4.54million yen | 7.15million yen                                       | Divorce<br>5.74million yen<br>Unmarried Father<br>3.96million yen |
| <b>Receipt of Child Support Rate</b>  |   | <b>28.1%</b>   |   | <b>8.7%</b>   |
| Amount of Child Support Received  |   | 50,485yen/month  |   | 26,992yen/month   |
| Child Rupport Allowance Receipt Rate  | 21.80%  | Divorce 71.7%<br>Unmarried Mother<br>75.2%                         | 49.40%  | Dovorce 48.8%<br>Unmarried Father<br>57.2%                        |
| Parents' Final Education: College,University or Graduated University                              | 16.2%   | Divorce12.5%<br>Unmarried Mother<br>11.0%                          | 43.2%   | Divorce 20.5%<br>Unmarried Father<br>39.7%                        |

Since time is limited, I will present only two points:

First, currently, only 48.2% of divorced and unmarried mothers are employed regularly, which is just a 15% increase from before they became single parents.

The 48.2% is compared to the 79.5% of single fathers who are in regular

employment, which clearly shows how low this figure is.

As a result, 36% of the single mothers are in non-regular or part-time jobs.

The second is the receipt rate of child support from a separated father is only 28%, which is very low.

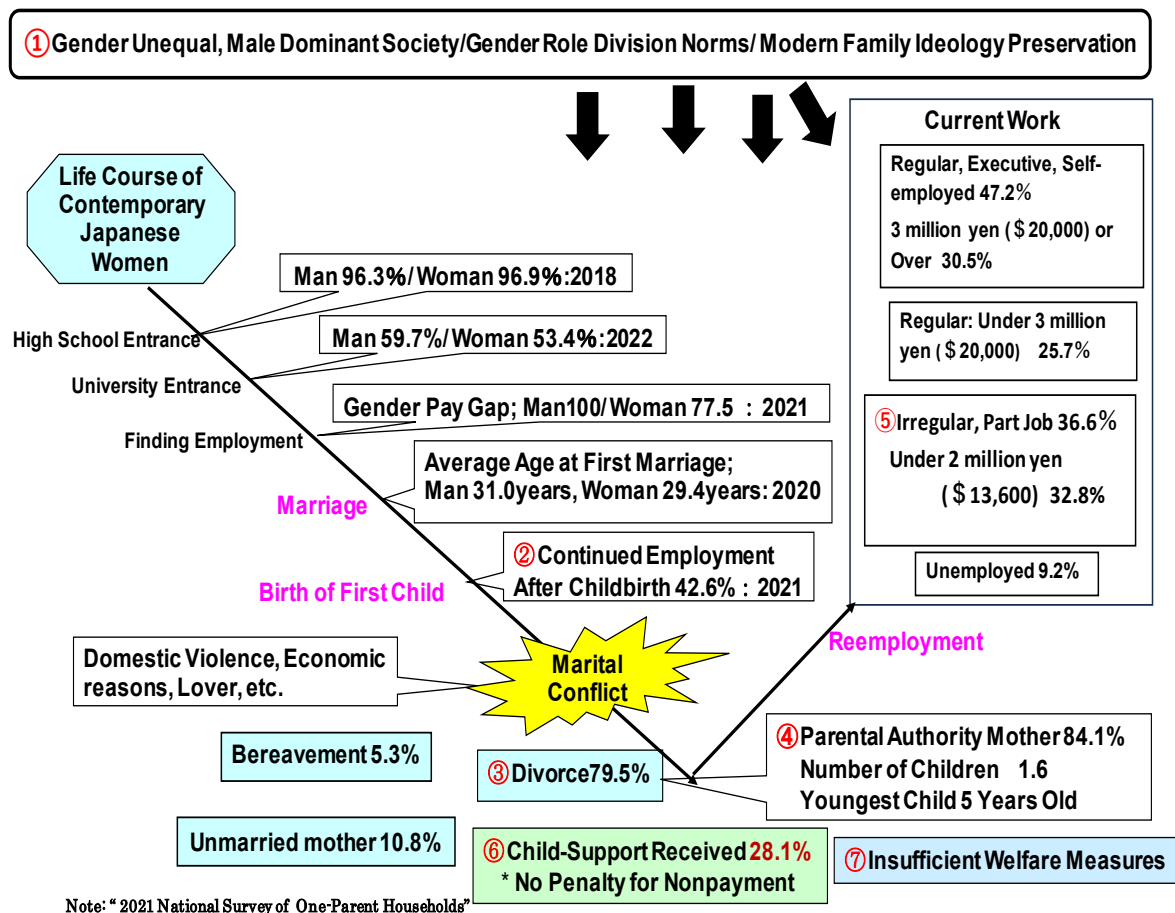
With these figures in mind, I turn to the next topic.

## 2. Mechanism of Impoverishment of Single Parents

The second topic is the mechanism of impoverishment for single Parents.

Fig.2.1 depicts the typical life course of contemporary Japanese women who become single parents.

Fig. 2.1 Typical Life Course of Contemporary Japanese Women Becoming Single with children



1 to 7 are factors related to the impoverishment of single parents.

① Japan remains a male-dominated society, prioritizing the traditional modern family model, that is the male breadwinner model, and reinforces gender role divisions.

This has led to disparities in college enrollment rates and wages between genders in employment.

After graduating from high school or university, many women find employment. After a few years, many women get married and eventually have their first child.

② Less than half of women continue working after their first child is born, and approximately half of them are retired and unemployed, relying on their husbands. The Japanese government provides tax and pension benefits to women who manage house chores, childcare, and nursing care.

Even if women are supported by their husbands, there may be no problem if their husbands work diligently, have a stable income, and take good care of their families.

However, not all husbands are supportive. Some can be abusive or neglectful, possibly due to personal issues like gambling, debts, or extramarital affairs. Wives often endure these situations, and when they feel in danger, their children start acting strangely, or they can no longer repay their debts, they seek divorce.

③ About 80% of single parents in Japan are divorced.

To add to the divorce situation, about 90% of all divorces in Japan are by agreement. However, there are many cases of divorce by agreement in name only, that are unfair. In some cases, divorces are granted without any prospects for life after the divorce.

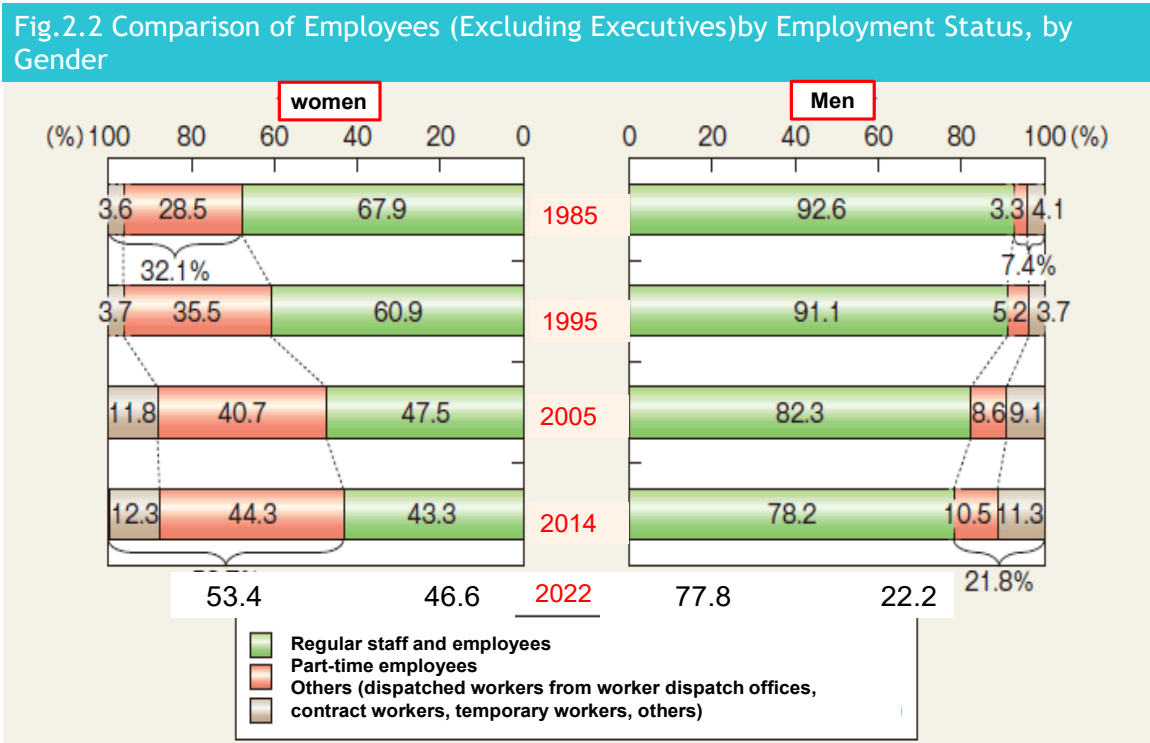
④ If there were children at the time of divorce, today, the mother has custody of more than 80% of the children. Incidentally, Japan has a system of sole custody after divorce.

⑤ Single parents need to work to earn money, but it is difficult for them to find stable, regular jobs.

Fig.2.2 illustrates the trend of the shift to non-regular employment including part-time and contract-based employees since 1980s. The data for women is on the left, and the data for men is on the right. The green part is the rate of regular employment, and the orange and brown parts are the rates of non-regular employment. According to the data from 1985 to 2022, the rate of non-employment has clearly increased for women than for men.

In Japan, most non-regular employment is unstable and low income.

Fig.2.2 Comparison of Employees (Excluding Executives) by Employment Status, by Gender



⑥ As mentioned earlier, more than 70% of separated fathers in Japan don't pay child support. And, the Japanese government is doing nothing to address the situation of those fathers.

I believe that a child support collection system is urgently needed, but the government is slow to take action.

However, Japanese society as a whole is indifferent to this situation.

⑦ Actually, there are various measures to support single-parent households in Japan.

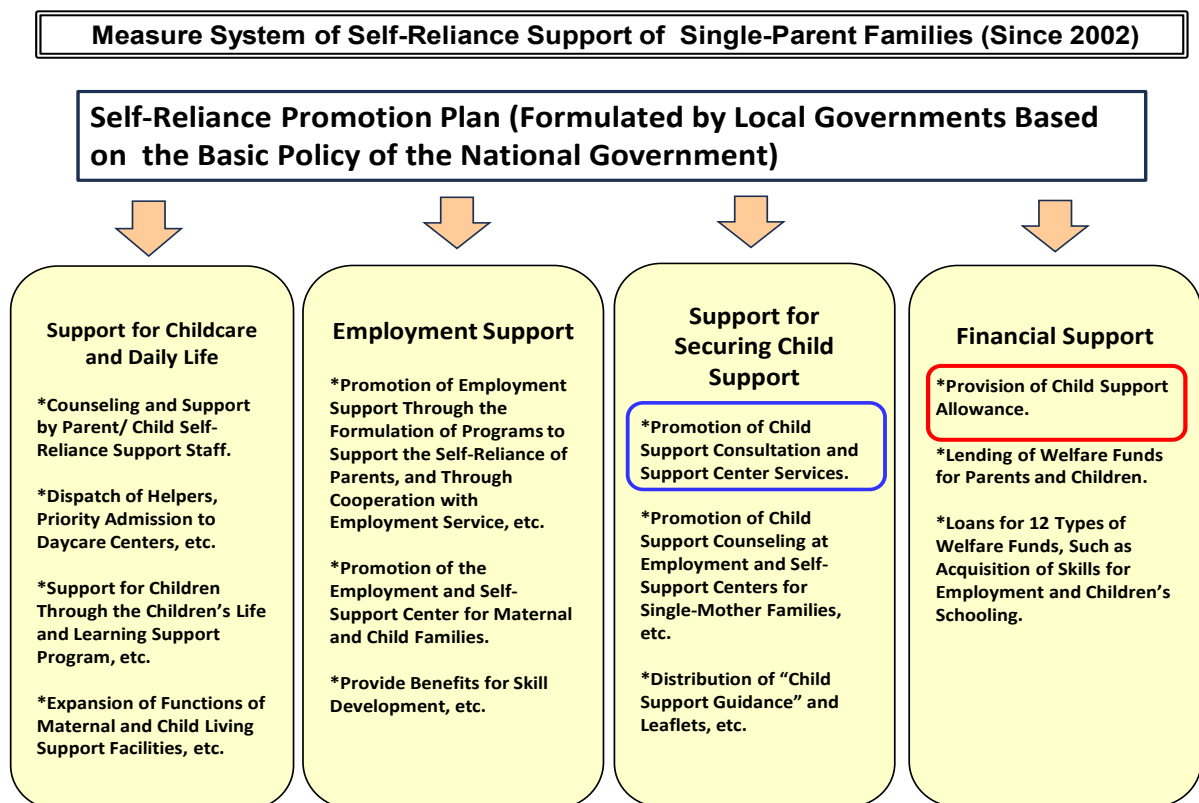
Fig.2.3 shows policies to support single-parent families in Japan.

However, effective measures are limited.

For example, child support allowance is useful but discriminated. In addition to the strict income limit, the amount paid is \$293(44,000yen) per month for the first child, which is reduced to \$67(10,000yen) for the second child, and then to \$40(6,000yen) for the third child and thereafter.

Regarding support for securing child support, there is only consultation and no collection.

Fig. 2.3 Measure System of Self-Reliance Support of Single-Parent Families (Since 2002)



All of the factors 1 to 7 add up to a higher risk of poverty.

Now, around half of all single-parent households in Japan live in poverty.

### 3 Social Exclusion and Tough Lives of Single Parents

Behind the inadequate public measures, there is a social stigma against divorce, unmarried mothers, and single parents.

That's to say:

1 The persistence of traditional modern family ideology in Japanese society. A family consisting a mother, a breadwinner-father, and two kids is the best and happiest.

2 Divorce is seen as undesirable and destructive to the modern family. So, it's said, "unacceptable and selfish".

3 Becoming unmarried mother is seen as a betrayal of the modern family. So, it's said, "shameful".

Therefore, conservative people who want to protect the traditional modern family may wonder why it is necessary to provide generous taxpayer support to such single parents.

4 To add one more point, there may be a fear in society as a whole that more generous support for single parents will lead to more divorces.

Under these situations, Japanese society excludes single parents and their children, and as a result, they face tough lives.

Fig.3.1 shows the reality of social exclusion in Japanese society.

The first group's outer core in light blue represents those who hold various economic, political, social and cultural rights in Japan and are currently in a majority.

The 2 group in the middle layer in light purple lacks the attributes of the 1 group, leading to their exclusion from their rights.

They may face restrictions, deprivation, or inaccessibility, resulting in impoverishment, discrimination, or isolation within their communities, and often live in unstable conditions with little hope for the future.

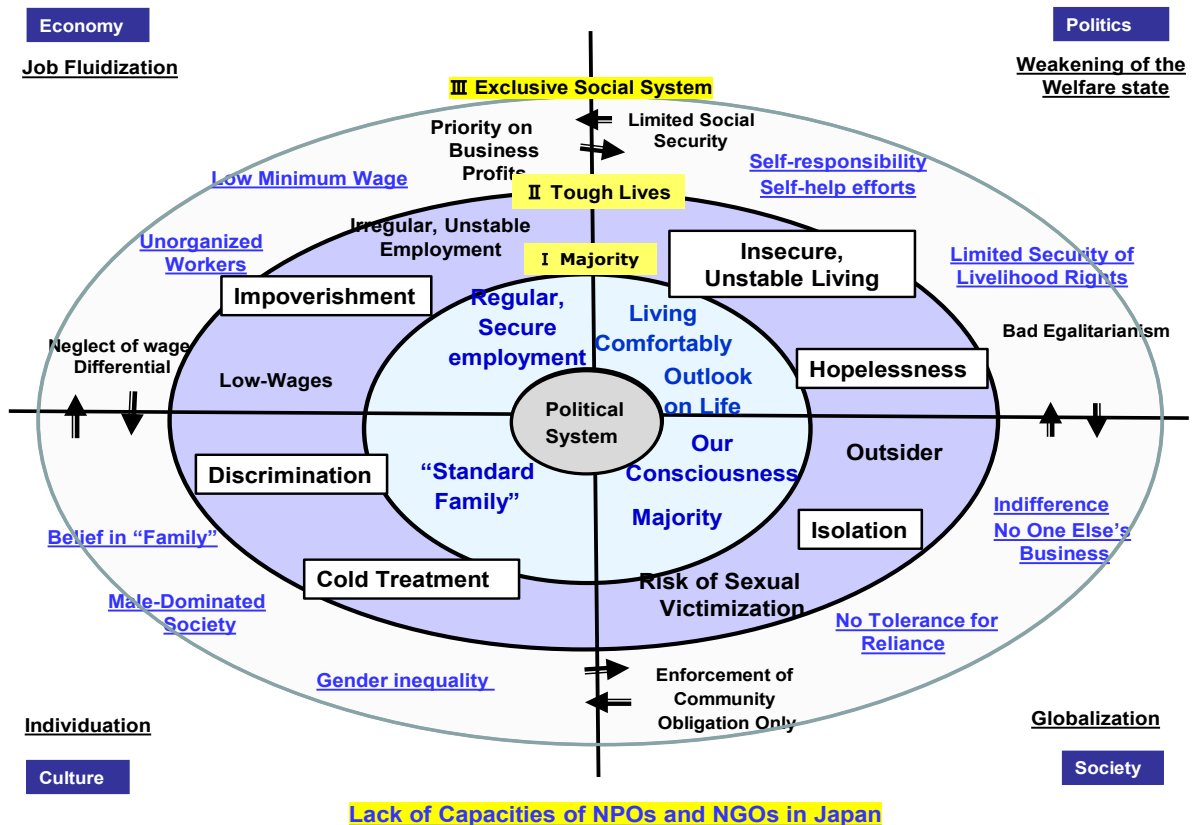
The outer layer in light grey represents the structure of the whole society that tolerates, neglects, and conceals the social exclusion of the 2 group.

And I would like to emphasize the entity that generates, maintains, and does not improve such a structure of social exclusion is the current political system as the core.



Although NPOs and NGOs in Japan are doing their best to support single-parent families on the front line, they are still lacking in capabilities.

Fig. 3.1 Aspects of Social Exclusion in Japan; Neglect of Poverty, Discrimination, and Tough Lives



In an exclusive society, single parents experience various tough lives, so their kids.

For example, when wages don't increase more than their cost of living even if they work hard, it makes their lives tougher and the sense of hopelessness becomes stronger.

Despite their efforts in work, housework, and raising children, their lives don't improve. As they age, they find it tougher to work hard and feel increasingly exhausted.

Furthermore, if they suffer from multiple problems in their daily lives and have no appropriate person to consult with, they feel a strong sense of oppression.

Many wonder why people divorce if it makes life harder. Yet, single parents often say life after divorce is tough but better than before.

So, I would like to ask the following questions.

Who is responsible for the problem single parents face?

Is divorce a failure in life?

Should children being raised by single parents be pitied?

#### **4 What Support is REALY Necessary for Single Parents?**

The topic from here on is support for single parents.

##### 1) My Personal View on “Separating”

First, here is my personal view on separation.

- “love” is not eternal.
- It is extremely difficult to repair a broken marriage or drifting-apart relationship.
- Continuing to endure a broken marriage will not improve the situation, and will make the lives tougher.

However, there are “desirable” and “undesirable divorces”. Undesirable divorces can lead to tough lives after divorce.

##### 2) Conditions for Easier Life after Divorce

Therefore, the following are conditions that can reduce the toughness of lives after divorce.

- The ability to make a living (job, child support, savings, etc.).
- A house with low cost (preferably one that does not cost much in rent).
- Support for childcare and housework.
- Friends or NPOs that understand the situation of single parents.
- Ensure to have concrete agreement with spouses.

However, don’t talk to the husband alone!

- Gather information on welfare measures for single-parent family.
- Life after divorce seems better than life before divorce – freedom, dignity, decision-making, stability, etc.

### 3) Our Messages to Single Parents

So, let's send our messages to single parents:

- Acknowledge that “you became single parent”.
- Be confident in your power and courage.
- Look forward, not backward.
- Feel entitled and take pride. Anyone has rights to live their own life, escape poverty, and live happy life.
- Don't strain yourself too much! Your tough lives are not your faults. You have already done enough.
- Don't be ashamed of relying on others! Take courage!
- Connect with supporters close at hand!
- Take care of your health.
- Don't feel sorry for your children. They are not unhappy!

So, here are our roles.

- To advise married women to leave from unrestorable marriage.
- To appeal for the dispelling of the negative image of divorce, unmarried mother, and single-parent family from society.
- It is essential to review gendered social norms and provide gender equality education.

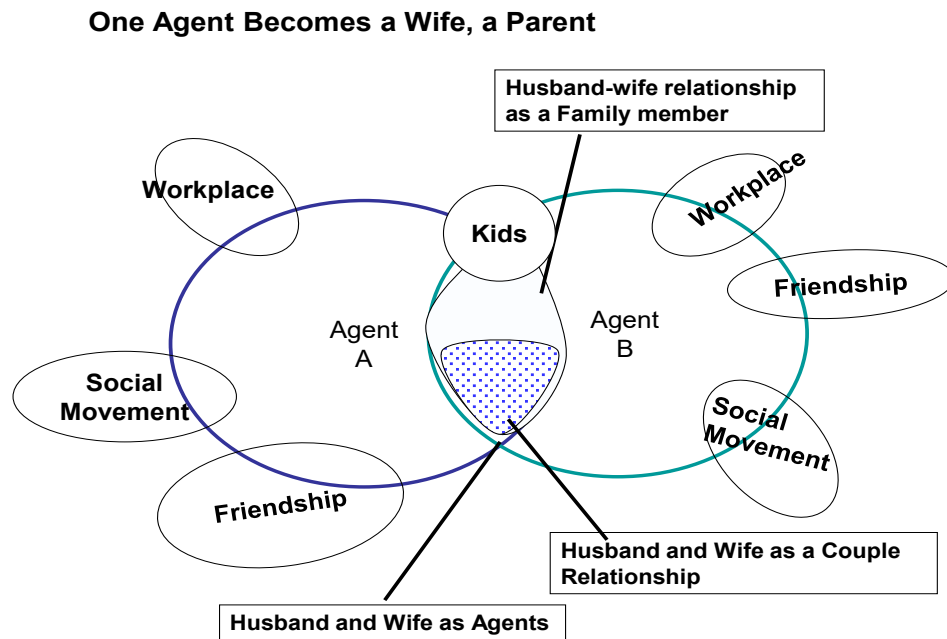
It is important to change this current social system.

I believe that gender equality education is crucial, especially in teaching children and youth about equal partnerships.

Fig.4.4 shows a gender-equal relationship with a partner when one agent becomes a wife or a parent.

It does not matter whether this agent A or this agent B is male or female.

Fig.4.1 Gender Equal Relationship between Intimate Agents



#### 4) What Means by “Support” Single Parents?

I believe that it is important to support the empowerment of single-parent family as a way to support them.

- Affirm becoming single parents (after divorce or unmarried) as one’s independent choice.
- Eliminate discrimination and prejudice against single parents.
  - Respect for diversity of families and individual lifestyles.
- Assure the fundamental human rights for single parents and their children to live in peace.
- Recognize social exclusion for single-parent family.
  - Don’t take it as “self-responsibility” issue.
- Promote notion of “fairness” to seek public assistance.
- Shift concept of “self-reliance” in Japan.
  - “Self-reliance” has to be backed up by “support-support relationship” (not by self-help).
  - Supporters are also empowered!

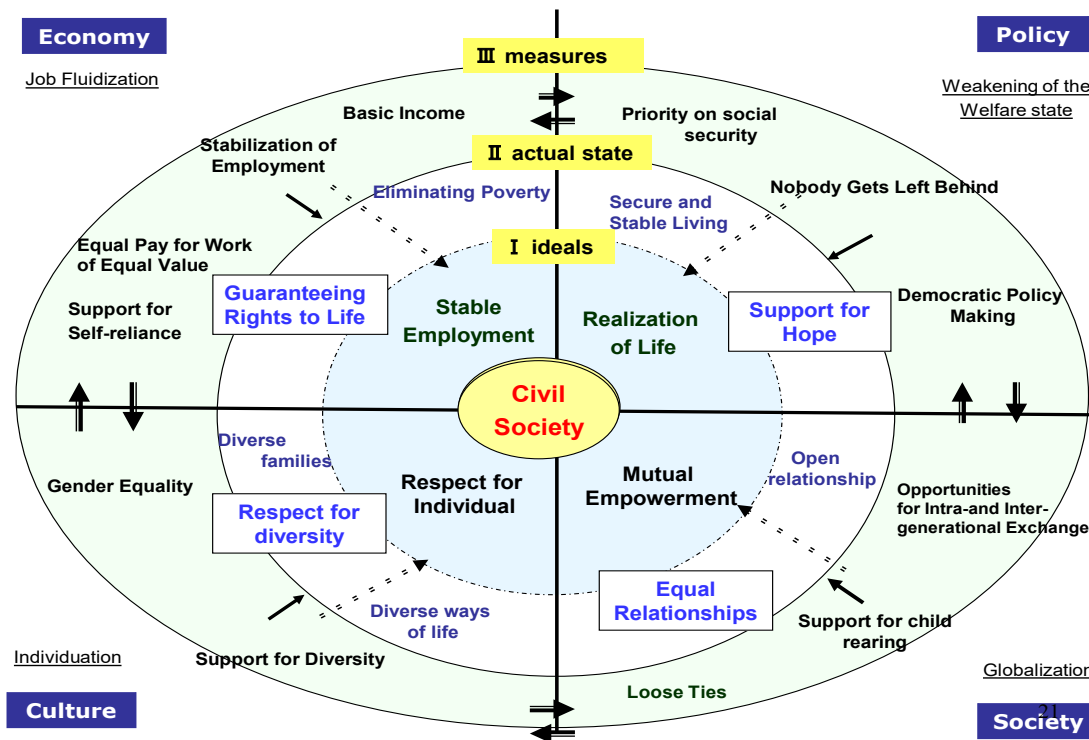
I would like to emphasize that supporting the empowerment of single parents means supporting them to be agents to realize an *Inclusive* society.

### 5 Need for an *Inclusive* Social Model

Fig.5.1 shows the model of an inclusive society that we are aiming for.

It is a society where everyone’s rights to live in peace are guaranteed, diversity is honored, equal relationships are fostered, and everyone can live with hope.

Fig.5.1 A social Model that is Inclusive of Single Parents and their Children



Our goal is a society of citizens, by citizens, and for citizens.

There is still much to be done.

Thank you so much.