

Altering the Work-Life Balance of Japanese Dads



Fathering Japan organizes workshops to help fathers and their children interact through play

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The word of the year in 2010 was definitely ikumen, meaning “men who care for children.” This was one of the latest signs of the massive changes occurring in the work sensibilities of Japanese people during the Heisei Era. What do these changes mean, and where are they taking the country?



Tetsuya Ando, founder of the nonprofit organization Fathering Japan

THE way Japanese society perceives work has undergone a transformation over the three decades of the Heisei Era. Most recently, the Work Style Reform Law passed in 2018 set a cap on overtime hours and ensured mandatory personal time off, among other changes. It gave men in particular the leeway to go beyond their traditional role of breadwinner to become more active participants in the lives of their children.

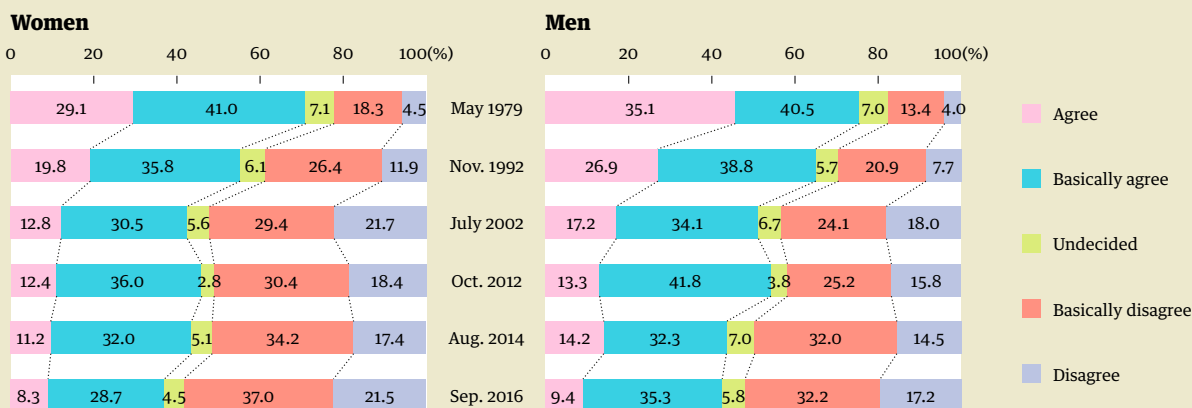
Tetsuya Ando, founder of the nonprofit organization Fathering Japan, experienced this paradigm shift in work-life balance firsthand in 1997, when he got married and had a daughter. He quit his job at a publishing company and began working at a bookshop, maintaining a double-income household with his wife, who worked full-time. Making the most of having daycare, his home and the bookshop all within a fifteen-minute bike ride, in the evenings

he would pick up his daughter at daycare and work the cash register with her strapped to his back before handing their daughter over to his wife. There were also times when he'd return to the store to finish up work after bathing and putting his daughter to sleep. “I respected my wife’s desire to keep working, and I wanted to try taking care of my kid myself, so the two of us pooled our resources and grew closer,” reflects Ando.

At that time twenty-two years ago, Japan didn’t have social structures in place to support dual-career couples. When the Andos started their family, only three fathers out of the hundred families using the Tokyo daycare their daughter attended picked up and dropped off their children. These dads were treated with cautious suspicion, as most people at the time were not used to seeing men handling childcare.

While having to rush to the daycare from work after

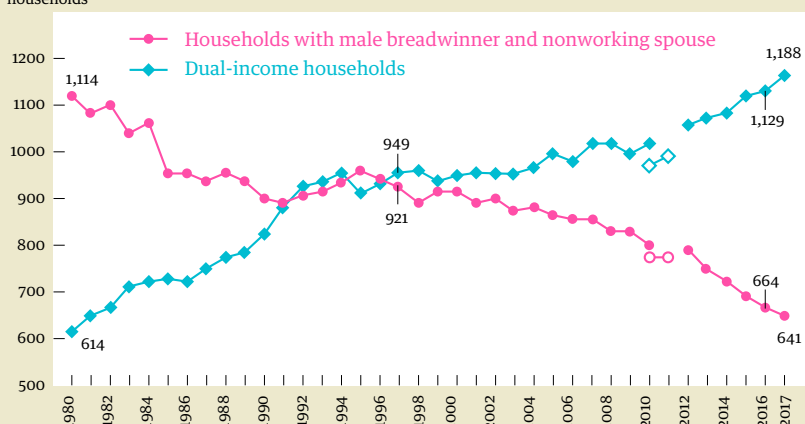
Changes in Agreement with the Statement “Husbands should work and wives should look after the household”



1. Based on data from the Government of Japan Cabinet Office’s “Public Opinion Survey on Women” in 1979, “Public Opinion Survey on Gender Equality” in 1992, “Public Opinion Survey on a Gender-Equal Society” in 2002, 2012 and 2016, and “Public Opinion Survey on Women’s Advancement” in 2014. | 2. Data until 2014 is based on responses of participants 20 years of age and older, while data from 2016 is based on responses of participants 18 and older.

Changes in numbers of dual-income households

Unit: ten thousand households



1. From 1980 to 2001, based on the Management and Coordination Agency’s “Labour Force Special Survey,” taken yearly in February, except for 1980 to 1984 when it was taken in March. From 2002 onward, based on the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications’ “Labour Force Survey (Detailed Tabulation).” Please be aware that there are some discrepancies between the methods and timing of the two surveys.

2. “Household with male breadwinner and nonworking spouse” refers to households with husbands who work outside agricultural industries and spouses who are part of the unemployed population.

3. The numbers shown below the blanks for 2010 and 2011 are countrywide results, excluding Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima prefectures.

hearing your child has a fever may be frustrating, there are also joys that can only be experienced by having kids. According to Ando, working mothers all know about that range of emotions, but many Japanese men don’t. In 2007, believing that if more men thought of being a father as something they consciously “do” and not something they just “are” that families and work life would change, he founded Fathering Japan.

Right around that time, the concept of work-life balance was gaining traction in Japan, and in 2010 *ikumen* (men who care for their children) was added to the cultural lexicon. So that it doesn’t just become a passing fad, Ando continues to tell the dads of Japan that active fatherhood would enrich both their families and their own lives.

“As a result of economic shifts, fathers are now in a society with a new structure, where it’s only natural

for both husbands and wives to work and men need to take care of their kids as well,” Ando says. “Seeing dads working hard as PTA presidents on the side has had a ripple effect, and the consciousness of bosses and managers has changed.” His nonprofit is now focusing on an awareness program called *iku-boss* (managers and bosses who recognize the worth of fathers participating in childcare).

Ando believes that work-life balance should not be like a set of scales where one side bears no weight, but more like a melting pot in which all the various elements in life blend together—children, work, study and caring for elder family members. Fathering Japan’s mission is to create a society where Japanese men caring for their children is so natural that the word *ikumen* fades from the lexicon, and Ando’s dream is to dissolve his nonprofit in another ten years because it has accomplished its purpose. **W**