Single Mothers Urged to Become Financially “Independent”

Naomi Yuzawa

In 2001, the Law for the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims (hereinafter the DV Prevention Law) was enacted in Japan. Although its enactment was late compared with other Asian countries, and it contains multiple problems, it can be said that it is a significant step for Japanese society in highlighting that the Japanese government needs to make efforts to solve problems regarding violence against women as a national problem.

However, in the following 2002, the revolutionary change was brought in measures for single-mother households. The outline for measures to promote the financial independence of single-mother families was developed by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. It says “It has been 50 years since the start of the Japanese welfare system for single-mother households and widows as a measure for war widows in 1952. In order to respond to the demands of the new era, we need to undertake a fundamental review of the system and restructure it.” The aims of the restructuring are to develop welfare service which can respond to the needs of each single-parent household, and give support for single mothers to be financially independent. To be more precise, it presents the following measures: 1. childcare and livelihood support, 2. employment support, 3. securing income for bringing up children, and 4. financial assistance. Particularly, in order to minimize changes in lifestyle after divorce, it prioritizes support for families who had just experienced divorce.

1. The turning point in the single-mother household support measures

The outline projects an image that support measures for single-mother households have been improved. It, however, restructured the system more rationally and effectively. In other words, the government accomplished the reform to restrain the total amount of allowance provided by revising the Cabinet Order on August and Child-Rearing Allowance law on November 2002. They took this decision because the number of recipients of the Child-Rearing Allowance is increasing due to the rise in the divorce rate.

The changes of measures are as follows: The amount of allowance is calculated according to the mother’s income, and its limit for entitlement of the full allowance was lowered from 2,048,000 yen (for single mother and a child) to 1,300,000 yen (570,000 yen for earning). The 80% of child support payment from ex-spouses is included in the mother’s income. The widow deduction and the special addition for widows were abolished. And the most important revision was to set a deadline for receipt of the full allowance. Until then, there was no time limit for receiving while children were qualifying ages. Part of the allowance, however, might be suspended at a constant rate after 5 years of receipt of the allowance. This revision will be enacted 5 years after implementation of the revised law.

The intention of this reconstructing was to change the welfare system for single-mother households from...
income security to support of financial independence, and promote early independence by intensively supporting the phase of the immediate aftermath of being single-mother household, so as to reduce the financial burden of the government with the rise in divorce.

This restrictive measure of the Child-Rearing Allowance was enforced just one year after the DV Prevention Law was enacted and the road was opened for women suffering from violence to flee from the violence. This is really contradictory. This measure could have rendered the DV Prevention law ineffective. If a woman runs out from her violent spouse with her children, an economically hard life will be waiting. Women and children would be forced to be patient, and their lives would be threatened. It is apparent to everyone that it is the duty of the government to improve the life security of women and children.

2. Employment support which accompanied by the reform of the Child-Rearing Allowance

On August 2003, Act on Special Measures concerning Employment Support for mothers of single-mother households was enacted as temporary legislation with a 5-year term limit. The intent of this lawmaking was described as “Because of the reduction measure adopted along with the revision of the Child-Rearing Allowance on April 2003, the need to get employment for mothers of single-mother households became higher. The Act, therefore, aimed to support single-mother households by legislating regarding employment support for the mothers of fatherless households.” As it is stated in the Act, the employment support as one of the support procedures for single-mother household was adopted with the idea of “covering the reduction of the Child-Rearing Allowance with their own earnings,” not the idea of securing employment as an indispensable right to live and improving the labor environment.

The main contents of the employment support procedures were: 1. benefit program for supporting financial independence, 2. program for an employment and self-reliance support center, 3. Promotion of employment in public institutions, and collecting and disseminating information at public employment security offices. The government seeks to decide the policy on the reduction in the Child-Rearing Allowance based on the effect of these procedures, and

![Comparison of average income per household and per capita of single-mother households with married couple households and aged households](image)

Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
released an annual report concerning the state of the implementation of the procedures. This report, however, had defects. It is not possible to figure out the advance in wages caused by the employment support procedure because only the numbers of “full-time,” “part-time” or “self-employed and others” were being reported regarding achievement in employment. It was not important to make out how many people could get a job for a certain period of time, but what matters for single mothers is that they can find sustainable employment and it stabilizes and improves their lives. The impact of the reform of the year 2002 on the single-mother households is getting serious because the Child-Rearing Allowance was reduced before assessing the effect of the employment support procedure, which seek increase in income and quality of life.

3. Socioeconomic gap is widening and instability of life is growing

Recently the working poor are becoming the centre of attention in Japan; especially the poverty and low income within single-mother households is becoming very serious. According to the Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions of the People on Health and Welfare by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the gap in annual income between married couples with children and single-mother households has been widening yearly. From 1975 to 1984, the income level of single-mother households was 45% to 50% of that of married couples with children. From 1985 to 1990 it fell off to about 40%, and from 1991 to 2000 it dropped down to around 30%. Single mothers’ average income is declining every year and they are becoming entrenched as a poverty group. The statistics on single-mother households compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2003 shows that single mothers’ annual income was 2,200,000 yen, and only 1,620,000 yen of which was income from work.

What is alarming here is the fact that more than 80% of single-mother households in Japan have jobs. The rate of employment is very high compared to Europe and the United States. Although single mothers are working with very little time to spend with their children, the income gap between single-mother households and others is widening.

If bringing up next generation is a social task, measures and policies should be taken to resolve the problem of poverty and low income of single-mother households from the perspective of the welfare of children. Although bringing up the next generation and the promotion of child welfare are important issues in Japan, child and maternal welfare is stepping down. In addition, discrimination against children out of wedlock continues to exist in Japan, and mirrors the reality of existing multiple discriminations against women and families other than the so-called “standard family,” which has a stay-at-home mother, a working father, and two children.

In the intermediate report by the committee for promoting the current government policy of “Challenge Again” Initiative, the government seeks to create a society in which it is easy for everyone to “challenge again” and does not entrench a division of winners and losers. I wonder if it can be an equal opportunity for everyone if everything is unequal from the start in life. Instead of the employment support together with welfare budget cutbacks, an employment support program alongside an enrichment of the welfare system is needed. The problems Single-mother households have are not the single-mother household’s problem but the social problems in which each person’s value is tested.

Naomi Yuzawa, associate professor at Rikkyo University, Department of Community & Human Services