

# Divorced Women Fight Financial Woes, Stigma

By Suvendrini Kakuchi

**S**ue Nagashima, 57, recalls her days as a single mother of two young sons as a “terrifying struggle for survival.”

“Financially I was dependent on my parents, my two part-time jobs, and a paltry government allowance,” she says. “At the end of each month I would wonder whether I could afford to feed my two boys the next day.”

financial difficulties, social discrimination, and often have to rear their children alone, according to counsellors and support groups here.

“Our surveys indicate that almost 70 percent of divorced mothers have trouble getting child support, which means they must learn to fend for their children alone. The situation can be very traumatic,” says Terue Shinkawa, executive director of the non-profit organisation Wink, which is

they do not have custody of them, even if the laws talk about parents’ financial obligation toward their children. Child allowances are between 20,000 to 40,000 yen (US\$180 to US\$360) per child per month.

In Japan too, it is not unusual to find divorced men having little involvement with their children after the separation.

Shinkawa, 38, a divorcee herself, says she was spurred to start Wink after her own experience of dealing with an ex-husband who refused to provide child support.

“I was so eager to leave my husband that I did not pursue the issue too strongly. But I now realise that not having child support was not only difficult for myself, but also for the children who felt their father did not care for them because he sent us no money,” she says.

Launched in 1995, Wink has a membership of 1,000 single mothers. It offers information and counselling for divorced or separated women, or women in need of advice on how to leave difficult marriages.

While there are legal provisions for child support, there is no enforcement mechanism for this except through going to court,

which is expensive and emotionally trying for mothers and the children.

Wink is now at the forefront of lobbying for new laws that ensure financial protection for children of divorced couples and establish visitation rights, in most cases for ex-husbands.

In April, the justice ministry presented a new draft of a bill covering child alimony to the Japanese Diet, or parliament. The law is aimed at establishing a new system where child allowances are automatically deducted from the pay cheques of their fathers after divorce.

Justice ministry official Takeo Tsutsui explains that under the law of household asset division, this new measure is expected to ease the single mothers’ financial burden.

“Under current divorce laws, most mothers are given custody of children under the age of 13 years and the right to a child allowance until they turn 20 years. But this law is not effective for various reasons. The new law, if passed in the Diet, will put into place a new system where enforcement will be carried out,” he says.

Mari Yamamoto, a 45-year-old manager of a furniture store, says the new law is “very welcome.”

...when she wrote down “divorced” in her resume, she was not able to get work. When she did get a job, some male officemates thought she was an easy woman after they found out she was divorced.

Nagashima divorced her violent husband when her second son was 3 years old. She now lives alone and is unemployed after bouts of severe depression, an illness she attributes to her difficult days in the past.

As Nagashima’s case illustrates, being a divorced woman in Japan is not always easy. They can face fi-

nancial difficulties, social discrimination, and often have to rear their children alone, according to counsellors and support groups here.

Japanese family laws do stipulate child support payments, but only 20.8 percent of divorced men met this obligation in 2000, statistics show.

Often, counsellors say, men do not want to pay for the children’s expenses when



Yamamoto left her husband with her two children six years ago and had to move in with her aged father, who shares the rent and looks after her middle school-age children until she returns home after work close to midnight during the week.

Her husband, she explains, paid child support for about a year, but the payments stopped coming after he remarried.

Japanese divorce laws are technically easy, requiring both parties to sign a divorce document that is registered in the local city office. Child support is decided at the family courts.

In 2002, more than 292,000 couples parted ways, roughly twice the number in 1980. Almost 90 percent of divorces are settled out of court.

Local reports say that the Japanese divorce rate of 2.27 percent is lower than the U.S.' 5.1 percent, but women in the United States get a better deal because of laws that require husbands to pay child and financial support and because of easier chances of remarriage there.

In Japan, being a divorcee can lead to discrimination as they are often perceived of as irresponsible or easy, some women say. Often too, especially in the rural areas, the fear of not having financial means, the desire to keep the family together for the children's sake and the perception that women should not complain prod

many to stay on in unhappy marriages.

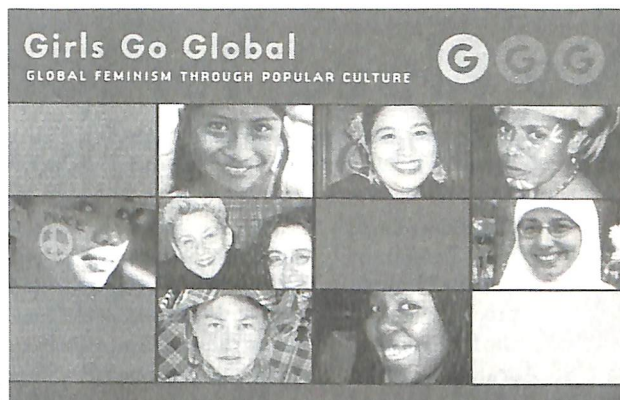
Nagashima relates how, when she wrote down "divorced" in her resume, she was not able to get work. When she did get a job, some male officemates thought she was an easy woman after they found out she was divorced. Worse, she says, a manager in her company suggested that she could make money by working in the entertainment industry.

But Hiromi Ikeuchi, a marital counsellor, and head of Tokyo Family Rapport, adds that while often it is the women who find themselves in difficulties after divorce—the men too have their own problems, especially those who want to continue to see their children.

"My work has shown that men usually suffer emotionally as well, since in the majority of divorce cases their wives are granted child custody. Against this backdrop, there must be more work done to raise consciousness on divorce, rather than only new laws on child support," she says.

Ikeuchi says child support must also accompany visitation rights. Husbands and wives must learn to accept that divorce also concerns the issue of children's rights, a new concept in Japanese society where mothers use child support as a bargaining chip for visitation rights for fathers.

Source: Inter Press Service, 27 May 2003, <<http://www.ips.org>>.



## Girls Go Global: How do you see Global Feminism?

The "Girls Go Global" project is an international initiative to bring together contemporary and pop culture images of global feminism from women and girls across the globe. Women and girls are encouraged to send essays (not more than 3,000 words), photos, art, web images, lyrics, poems, graffiti, and multimedia depictions of feminism to be a part of a global collection for publication and possible exhibition.

The project wants to demystify feminism and promote a positive and engaging connection with the term. The ultimate goal is a creative book produced by feminist activists on their own terms and design. It will be compiled and reviewed by a panel of international experts.

"Girls Go Global" aims to provide a funky source of literature that invites people to become a part of the global women's movement(s) that will be portrayed as a talented and inspiring bunch of women from around the world, and equipped with different views and skills, working together for justice. Project organisers are hoping that the outcomes will provide a context that values and celebrates non-conventional and non-academic forms of expression of feminism(s) coming from women across age, culture and background.

"Girls Go Global" received initial funding from the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) and the Ford Foundation, but requires additional funding and assistance. The project is an initiative of a group of global feminists and is run by a voluntary Advisory Group.

For more information on this project, please contact: Suzette Mitchell, E-mail: <[suzetemitchell2002@yahoo.com](mailto:suzetemitchell2002@yahoo.com)> or <[suzette@girlsgoglobal.org](mailto:suzette@girlsgoglobal.org)>, Website: <<http://www.girlsgoglobal.org>>.