

Study on Challenges and Support Needs of Women in the Process of Divorce  
— Interview Survey of Single Mothers and Pre-single Mothers —

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### Summary

Women who are practically a single mother due to living separately from their husband and are about to get divorced are referred to as pre-single mothers. This study aims to clarify the lifestyle challenges and need for support of pre-single mothers in the process of divorce, and to examine effective support measures.

According to the 2016 fact-finding report on single-parent households by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, about 80% of single motherhood results from divorce, and more than 80% of the mothers hold custody of all of their children after divorce. In Japan, there have been numerous research studies on the lifestyle difficulties of single mothers after divorce. This issue is also deeply related to child poverty and is widely regarded as a societal issue that must be improved.

However, pre-single mothers, who are in a stage directly before single motherhood, are not regarded as single parents because they are still legally married. Hence, many of them do not qualify for public single-parent support and the household-based social security system. Many pre-single mothers are forced to become self-reliant and raise their children without public support. They can be regarded as single mothers in the most severe condition. However, there are no official statistics on them nor prior research on their actual situations.

Therefore, in this study, we held an in-depth interview with 38 single divorced mothers and 2 pre-single mothers and investigated in detail their lifestyle conditions while they lived separately from their husband prior to divorce. We also conducted a hearing survey on two private NPOs that support single parents. We found that during the divorce process, many of the survey respondents experienced severe livelihood insecurity while having to overcome various challenges including intense divorce negotiations with their husband without any time to prepare for their post-divorce life and without receiving public support.

The lifestyle challenges faced by pre-single mothers from this study can be summarized into the following five points. (1) There are not any nearby comprehensive consultation services with which pre-single mothers facing complex challenges can easily consult. Pre-single mothers also sometimes lack access to appropriate public information because they are not qualified for public support. (2) Many survey respondents had retired from work after marrying or giving birth, and had no choice but to endure harsh realities without public support after separating from their husband. More than half of the respondents in this study stayed with their parents and received

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some support from their relatives during their separation. Those without such support system faced even harsher reality. Some of them rushed the divorce process while accepting unfavorable conditions to become eligible for public single-parent support. (3) The issues of the divorce system in Japan have been significantly impacting on the life of pre-single mothers. Currently, 90% of divorces fall under the category of prolonged mediation system or divorce by consent. This has been making it difficult to shorten the separation duration or ensure support such as marital and child support. (4) Regardless of their level of financial independence, most of them were anxious about raising children on their own and balancing work and child rearing. (5) Domestic violence (DV) accounts for a high percentage of the causes of divorce. However, at the moment, DV victims cannot receive public support if the DV damage cannot be proven. Also, as there are also no countermeasures against perpetrators, the only option the victims have is to escape. Therefore, most cases including many of the respondents of this survey had to conceal their address or abandon their right to claim marital and child support. Some of them also suffered the dilemma of career suspension or severe PTSD. Therefore, we urgently need effective countermeasures against DV, which can be said to be the greatest human rights violation and crime. The lifestyle challenges of pre-single mothers elucidated by this interview survey comprehensively illustrate the social norms that promote gender inequality, etc., such as division of labor by gender role as well as the systems that have ironically fostered these norms.

With the transformation of families and communities, society is being significantly pressed to figure out how to solve the problems that exist between the systems and people who are facing complex challenges. In this study, we present the following two pre-single mother support measures.

The first is to establish practical and highly satisfactory support systems through the organic collaboration and cooperation between municipalities, NPOs, and private NPOs, such as self-help groups. There are limitations to the conventional public support framework for helping pre-single mothers facing various challenges who are left behind by the public system. Private NPOs provide a wide range of support to pre-single mothers without excluding them. We believe their collaboration would make up for the inconsistencies in the system and ensure comprehensive support to pre-single mothers. This requires municipalities, etc. to be flexible in their responses.

The second is to enhance public support to those who are in separation. Although there are exceptions, pre-single parents are currently excluded from public single-parent support systems. Pre-single parents hold severe lifestyle anxieties and do not have the time nor the energy to prepare for an autonomous life after divorce.

One positive and timely trend is that the government is drafting proposals to allow those in divorce arbitration to also receive a child rearing allowance, which is referred to as a lifeline for single parents. We expect that this would further promote the discussion on the divorce system. It is also noteworthy that in recent years, entities such as municipalities started offering parent

education courses to parents who are about to get divorced.

This study has provided an overview of the lifestyle challenges of pre-single mothers who have been neglected by the system, which have received little attention until now. In the future, it will be necessary to delve into the problems of individual issues and analyze them to design more effective support measures.