

The paid-leave pioneers: A few Japanese dads have sparked a child-care revolution ^[1]

The country's paternity leave is among the most generous in the world. These men are trying to inspire dads to actually use it.

Author: Schulte, Brigid

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EXCERPTS

When Kaoru Yamamoto and his wife, Nozomi, had their first, second and third daughters, he did what most other Japanese men do: nothing.

"I was just like all other Japanese husbands. I let my wife do everything," Yamamoto said through an interpreter from his home on the outskirts of Hiroshima.

It wasn't his only option. Japan has one of the most generous paid-leave policies in the world for women and men alike: By law, Japanese men can take as much as one year's leave from work to give care and still be paid a substantial portion of their salary. But while surveys show that as many as 80 percent of young Japanese men say they want to use that paid caregiving leave, barely 7 percent do. More than half are off for no more than five days.

In the United States, surveys similarly show that men want to take family leave from work, especially if it's paid, and that they are as likely as women to say they anticipate needing to do so. But they don't. And until men begin to share the caregiving load more equitably with women — possibly pushed by the unique demands of the covid-19 crisis — the American gender revolution will remain stalled.

Researchers contend that one of the reasons more men don't take leave in the United States is that it's one of the few developed nations that does not have a national public policy guaranteeing paid family leave of any kind — maternity, paternity, parental, sick leave, ill child or elder care. A national paid family and medical leave policy, advocates argue, would normalize the understanding that all workers — not just women — require time to provide care.

Then again, if policy alone were enough, far more Japanese men would be spending their time changing diapers, packing lunches and frantically home-schooling kids between Zoom conference calls — and members of the country's parliament wouldn't have to consider, in an effort to reverse a record-low birthrate, making paternity leave mandatory.

In the United States, the temporary emergency 12-week paid family leave policy that Congress passed in the spring has been available to any parent whose child's school or child-care center is closed because of covid-19. While reliable, nationwide data is not yet available, one analysis of Rhode Island showed that the number of men applying for paid leave increased an astonishing eightfold from February to March. Still, that number paled in comparison to the flood of applications by women, who disproportionately made up 80 percent of all new applicants.

But understanding what finally drove Yamamoto to take one month of paid parental leave when his fourth daughter was born a few years ago may prove instructive not only in Japan, but in the United States, too.

Peter Moss, a researcher with the Leave Network, has studied paid-leave policies around the globe. His analysis has uncovered three key factors that actually enable men to use such initiatives: a well-designed, flexible policy with job protection, adequate pay, and an individual quota or entitlement reserved just for men; a supportive work environment that normalizes men as caregivers; and a few good pioneers to encourage "contagious" behavior.

"It takes real political and societal commitment" for men to take paid leave, he said, "and lots of explaining to people that fathers are as capable of caring as mothers."

To Hideki Nakazato, a sociologist at the University of Kobe who studies fathers and parental leave, Japan is in need of more pioneers. He once searched far and wide to study Japanese men who had taken more than a day or two of parental leave. He found six. These men, Nakazato said, were more motivated by a desire to do something special than by the fear of not fitting in or of suffering reprisals at work.

"It required a kind of pioneer spirit," Nakazato said. "But in Japan, that kind of spirit is important for the first step."

That's why, as the Japanese government has begun to strongly encourage male civil servants to take at least a month of child-rearing leave, all eyes have been on the nation's 39-year-old environment minister, who took a much-anticipated two weeks of intermittent

parental leave earlier this year, even as the coronavirus began to rage. Shinjiro Koizumi received high praise in some quarters for serving as a role model and supporting his wife, Christel Takigawa, a popular television presenter. But he was also roundly criticized in more conservative circles; it wasn't all that long ago that one of Koizumi's fellow cabinet ministers famously scoffed that raising infants and toddlers is a job for women.

Yamamoto says he never set out to be a paid-leave pioneer himself. He had to: Nozomi's post-pregnancy recovery was slow and difficult, and the girls' grandparents lived too far away to help.

Yamamoto, who sells medical devices for Johnson & Johnson, initially worried his career would take a hit. He'd never seen another man — anywhere — take paid parental leave. But shortly before Yamamoto needed leave, his company, in an effort to boost gender equality, began to make the case that productivity is tied to work-life balance and health, not to working from 6 a.m. until midnight. The latter approach is what Yamamoto and so many other Japanese workers have gotten used to, a system that makes it virtually impossible for couples to equitably combine work and care.

The lights began to go off at 7 every night at the Tokyo headquarters. And when the company rolled out an expanded, global, paid parental leave policy of eight weeks at 100 percent pay, they encouraged men to take it, too.

Chris Hourigan, president of Janssen Japan, a Johnson & Johnson subsidiary, not only modeled an 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. workday (with no after-hours emails) but also began saying in town hall meetings that spending time with his kids — not work — was the most important thing in his life. "I wanted to send the message out to men that if you have a family, your responsibility is to actually be there, and not just leave things up to your partner," Hourigan said.

The deliberate effort to change the male-dominated overworked culture so common in Japan — as in the United States — gave Yamamoto the nudge he needed. "In our company, we're supposed to cherish family values," he said. "So I was ready to say: 'I'm trying to fulfill our company credo' if I met any protest. But I didn't."

Instead, Johnson & Johnson sent a video crew to his house. Now, it prominently features his story on its website, in newsletters and in company literature. In the year following Yamamoto's parental leave, three other men in his small office alone followed his lead.

The experience changed his relationship to his family: The children used to rarely see him, instead writing notes that he would read when he came home from work, long after their bedtimes. Suddenly, Yamamoto was up making breakfast, taking his elder daughters to school, washing dishes, doing laundry, changing diapers and putting the children to bed.

"Up until then, I feel ashamed to say, I had not done any household chores," Yamamoto said. "I didn't realize how difficult it is."

He now works from home in the morning to help get the girls to school. And he's cut down on meetings, so that he and his team can get their work done faster and he can be home for family dinners. "The girls are so much happier with him around," Nozomi said.

Yamamoto became living proof of the mantra of Tetsuya Ando, founder of the nonprofit Fathering Japan: that the experience of being a caregiver changes men.

Ando learned that firsthand. Pressured by his father to define himself by what he earned, he worked as a "salaryman" and felt wedded to work for years. But he was inspired by images of John Lennon caring for his son Sean and took parental leave to care for his second daughter — an experience that led him to quit his job and dedicate his life to ensuring more men become involved fathers.

"There's no better education for men than experiencing it," Ando said. "And if fathers change, families change, communities change, companies change, then society changes."

Shintaro Fukutake was the first man to use paid parental leave at Sophia University, where he is an anthropology professor. He took six months of caregiving leave when his son Kotaru was born and then, a few years later, four months when his son Haruma arrived.

Far from considering himself a pioneer, Fukutake and his wife, fellow anthropology professor Yoriko Tatsumi, thought of it as a "kind of experiment." What they found, irritatingly, was that everyone simply expected Tatsumi to take maternity leave, while everyone praised Fukutake for taking paternity leave and establishing a pattern of equally shared work, housework and caregiving (a pattern they say continues today). The university even asked him to give a workshop and write an essay about his experiences.

"We have to forget about praising men," Fukutake said. "This is, after all, very usual behavior."

Yet the story of Glen Wood, it would seem, is a cautionary tale of what can happen when pioneering men get too far out in front of traditional culture. Wood, a Canadian national fluent in Japanese, worked for years as a high performer in finance for Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley in Tokyo and is in the middle of a bitter, protracted legal battle with the company over alleged paternity discrimination. In court filings, Wood says the company refused his request for parental leave when his then-girlfriend was about to deliver their son, harassed him by requesting a DNA test to ensure his paternity, and, when he sought to work as a single father, sidelined him and slashed his pay. (A company spokesperson said Wood's account is "contrary to the facts.")

In publicly speaking out about his situation, Wood has become a cause celebre in Japan. His website and court hearings draw huge followings, and other men have been emboldened to share their own stories, with at least three other paternity harassment cases filed since he went public.

"People have been saying: 'Don't give up. You're fighting for all of us,'" said Wood, who has filed an appeal of an April ruling that went against him.

“Growing up in a home where my dad died when I was young, and I didn’t know him,” Wood continued, “I feel very strongly that children have a right to spend time with their father.”

Such stories, in generating media coverage and broader discussion, may go a long way toward countering what researchers have referred to as Japan’s “pluralistic ignorance” — the fact that although surveys show a majority of men want to take parental leave, they don’t because they think other men would disapprove. Talking openly may help them see that most men, in reality, yearn for it themselves.

Wood, Ando, Yamamoto, Fukutake and Koizumi may be pioneering outliers for now. But at one time, so was Lennart “Hoa-Hoa” Dahlgren. The red-haired, muscle-bound Swedish wrestler posed with his infant son in the 1970s as part of the Swedish government’s “Project Dad” push to get more men to take paid parental leave. In 1991, barely 6 percent of Swedish men did so.

It wasn’t until Sweden changed its policies in 1995, introducing one of the world’s first universal public “father quotas” — non-transferrable, paid caregiving leave just for men. Today, 9 out of 10 Swedish fathers take paid parental leave, one of the highest usage rates in the world, and the national ripple effects have been tidal: Studies show that Swedish mothers more often return to work after childbirth, have seen their earnings go up and enjoy improved health, while men share housework and child care more equally and have better relationships with their children.

Yamamoto hopes that, one day, caregiving leave will take a similar course in Japan: becoming not a revolutionary act for men, but an expected one. That extends especially to his future sons-in-law.

“And if they don’t take it,” Yamamoto says, half-jokingly, “I will.”

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