

# Training Workshop for Single-Parent Family Supporters in Miyagi

Date: November 28 – November 29, 2015

Time: 9:30-17:00

Venue: Espol Miyagi, Sendai City

Many Japanese single-parent families not only suffer from the high poverty rate, but also face various other challenges: work issues, day-to-day living and child-rearing challenges, marital problems, as well as lack of educational, mental care, and social resources. The aim of this training workshop is to educate and enlighten those who work to support single-parent families by lecturers who understand these challenges. The workshop also provides supporters the opportunity to listen to the real experiences of the parties concerned and learn more about the current state and circumstance of single-parent households.

## Main Participants

single-parent groups (wawawa, Windy's Club), aid agency counselors, NPO staffs, county staffs, newspaper reporters, TV officials, individuals involved with or willing to support single-parent families and children

Day-1: 22 adults/7 children

Day-2: 25 adults/9 children

(The total of 43 participants, including lecturers, staffs and children)

## Organizer

NPO Women's Eye  
NPO Single Mothers' Forum

## Cooperating Group

Wawawa (volunteer group of single female parents/children of Tome and Minamisanriku-cho Areas)

## Granting Agency

Miyagi Prefecture Subsidy for Support of Local Reconstruction  
NPO Kurikoma-kougen Nature School

Japanese Women's Leadership Initiative

## Donation

Ohata Family (Japanese-American family from Los Angeles)

## DAY-1 : November 28, Saturday

Participating mothers and children rushed in and out of the childcare room for 30 minutes prior to the start of the program. The members of "wawawa" and their children helped at the front desk and setting up the venue, and the workshop started just on time. The children, altogether 16 kids, were safely taken care of by the staff during the two-day sessions.



### ◆ Orientation

After a brief course overview and basic precautions given by **Megumi Ishimoto**, Executive Director of Women's Eye (WE), the participants wrote down their expectations for the workshop and posted the cards on a display board.

### ◆ The Current State of Single-female Parents and the Support; Maternal and Child Welfare Measures and Child Care Support

**Chieko Akaishi**, Administrative Director of NPO Single Mothers' Forum, explained that many single-female parents feel isolation because they cannot find a place to associate with their peers. They also find difficulties raising children until the age of their independence. The major problem is that more than

50% of Japanese single-female-parent households have non-regular employment with lower annual income, although the employment rate itself is as high as 80% on a global basis. In Miyagi Prefecture, five out of ten single-female parents cannot cover their cost of living sufficiently. Living with such disadvantage directly affects the younger generation.



Ms. Akaishi also pointed out that the public support system is often not one-stop, and since its visibility is rather low, it has very limited utilization rates. There were a number of questions from the audience after the lecture.

### ◆ Personal Experiences

**The members of wawawa**, a volunteer group of single-female parents and children of Miyagi, shared their experiences of their precarious living situations and society's biased view of their single-mother status. They also commented how difficult it is to find higher income work even when they have proper qualification and experience due to being limited to work environments that are sympathetic and supportive of child-rearing. They said that getting out of the poverty cycle is not easy, and so the existence of the peers and friends of wawawa has acted as a constant source of great support and comfort.

◆ **Japanese Law Procedures for the Single-parents; the Proceedings at the Time of Divorce, Distribution of Property, Child Support, Visitation Exchanges and Custody, and Domestic Relations Case Procedure Act**

**The Lawyer Yukiko Sato** lectured on the concrete procedures related to child support and visitation exchange with reference to actual cases of DV victims. She also gave lectures on position of women in the Constitution of Japan. Through her experience handling many divorce cases, she has seen DV victims deprived of pride and will to live. "I strongly wish for the DV victims to look back and remember the persons they were before marriage and reclaim who they truly are."

◆ **Support for the DV Victims**

**Emiko Suzuki** of Windys Club, a single-female-parent group, explained to the audience that DV victims need to personally redefine themselves as survivors of traumatic experience rather than to view themselves as weak, defective, and unwise losers in life. "It is important to lead DV victims in a direction where they can establish a life in which human rights are respected and psychological trauma is healed. As for the support, we work as a team and try not to drive them into isolation."



The exchange event at night was the first direct meet-up between members of wawawa and Windys Club. All participants – the supporters, the single-parents, and their very excited children – enjoyed a pleasant meal and chat.

**DAY-2: November 29, Sunday**

The program resumed on the second day with self-introduction by all participants.

◆ **Employment Support for Single-female Parents and Life Career**

**Makiko Gyoba**, Director of the Single-mother Household Consultation and Support Center of Sendai, outlined her organization. The center supports those seeking counseling through all phases, from the

pre-divorce period, through bouts of confusion, to finally feeling independent. Unlike other support centers, her organization specializes only in female-single-parents and their families. In addition to the fact that the problems these households encounter often differ from those of single-male-parent households, this also gives consideration to the fact that many female counselees simply are afraid of men as a result of the traumatic memories of DV and divorce.

**Miki Kobayashi**, a mother-and-child support consultant and life career consultant, then followed up to explain the actual activities of the Center in more detail. "At the time one becomes a single-female parent she tends to get confused and nervous because things like divorce procedures, job-hunting activities and other complicated matters occur all at once and seemingly in random order. Because of a noticeable shortage of adequate knowledge and information, she feels vaguely insecure about the future." It is important, therefore, to guide the counselee in the direction that is best for her to begin to build small success on small success. "Our hope is she can build self-confidence. If she regains confidence and pride, she can accept the results even if she fails."

◆ **Personal Experience**

**Yoshinobu Murakami**, Executive Director of Japan Single Father Network, shared his own experience as a single-male parent. He talked in detail how difficult it was for him to find work while taking care of infants.

◆ **Involvement with the Single-parent Families and the Children's Mental Care**

**Junko Kobayashi**, Executive Director of NPO Childline Miyagi, explained how her organization opened a hotline for children. She also introduced an example of how mothers caring for small children started their own day-care service when there was a serious lack of day-care centers in Sendai.



◆ **Case Studies**

The participants divided into small groups and discussed the appropriate measures to take for the three actual case examples shown by Ms. Akaishi.

## ◆ Recaps by the Participants

Prompted by Ms. Ishimoto, the participants wrote down on Post-it Notes what they had learned during the two-day sessions, and shared their thoughts with the other members.



### <Voices from the Participants>

- ◇ I thought it was too early for me to participate in this kind of program, but it wasn't. I can now feel the path I am going to take is not wrong.
- ◇ Although public opinion seems kinder compared to 20 years ago when I became a single-parent, I feel that living itself is getting harder. I want to feel real warmth from people!
- ◇ I realized that I am not alone, and many others have also gone through the same kind of experiences.
- ◇ I felt the importance of simply "cuddling up" to the person and offering silent support, as everyone has her own story
- ◇ Having no knowledge is a big negative; knowledge brings you big power.
- ◇ The importance of having this kind of place where single-mothers and their peers, along with their various supporters, can gather together and exchange thoughts and ideas

### <Achievements>

- ◇ Single-female parents and their various supporters were able to learn and develop together for two days.
- ◇ All members were able to establish connections – between single-female parents, between supporters, and between single-female parents and supporters.
- ◇ Participating mother's recognizing the various available sources of information and support services.
- ◇ Supporting groups and parties realized that many of their support measures were not reaching their intended targets as effectively as they thought.
- ◇ The mothers showed an extremely strong eagerness to learn.
- ◇ The mothers spoke of the importance of having connected with peers whom they could talk to and rely on.

### <The Staff's Comment >

Some content during the session stirred up past memories and caused some of the mothers to get

emotional and shed tears. Though they were told they were free to leave the room, but all chose to participate through the end. "It was a chance to overcome and learn" was their words. The two-day program worked positively to empower the mothers, and seeing them leave for home with some excitement in their voices was very moving.

### <NPO Single Mothers' Forum Newsletter>

(Excerpt)

In collaboration with NPO Women's Eye, the Training Workshop for Single-parent Family Supporters was convened on November 28 and 29 at Espol Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture. Seven mothers from wawawa, a volunteer group of single-female parents and children of Tome and Minamisanriku area, and a member of Sendai's Windys Club also participated.

The contents mostly mirrored the event held in Tokyo. We also invited Ms. Yukiko Sato, a local lawyer, as a lecturer, and asked Ms. Emiko Suzuki of Windys Club to talk about support for DV victims. Ms. Junko Kobayashi of Miyagi Children's Network and Ms. Miki Kobayashi of Single-Mother Household Consultation and Support Center of Sendai, an organization commissioned by Sendai Gender Equal Opportunity Foundation, were responsible for the section on job assistance. The members of wawawa and Mr. Yoshinobu Murakami of Japan Single Father Network shared their experiences as single-parents, which very much moved the audience.

The participants also included staff from job assistance agencies for single-female households, the prefectural office staffs and consultants specializing in women's problems, and may lay the foundation for a new network within Miyagi in the future.

Seven single-mothers attended the workshop from the tsunami-devastated areas of Tome and Minamisanriku. Both the concerned parties and the supporting parties interacted freely during the sessions, and this mixed atmosphere was very comfortable. "Everything carried a meaning," explained one mother. She enthusiastically consumed information and was extremely happy to gain knowledge that was previously so difficult to obtain. I like to think such delight is the result of the steady effort of Women's Eye, which has been supporting wawawa's activities, and of all the other supporting groups that I have met in the afflicted areas. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the new connections forged at this workshop.

We will be taking this workshop to Shizuoka and Okinawa next February, and we welcome the participation of all you neighbors! (Akaishi)