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No child's play

**As Japan and other wealthy Asian nations struggle to boost sagging birth rates, and women are forced as a result to juggle children and careers, families are often unattractive options. Elite Japanese bureaucrat Masato Yamada rose to the challenge of taking paternity leave. He tells KYOKO HASEGAWA why he took the plunge.**

CLAD in a dark suit, 38-year-old Masato Yamada goes on a morning commute like most Japanese men his age. Except he has a one-year-old son in the backseat of his car and the first colleagues he greets are mothers bringing their children to nursery school.



Masato Yamada with his wife Atsuko and their children Eco and Takashi (in baby buggy).

Yamada's perspective has changed after doing what was once unthinkable for a Japanese man – taking paternity leave.

Yamada and his wife Atsuko, 37, are both high-level officials at Japan's trade ministry. When she had twins three years ago, she went on leave.

When they had another child, Yamada decided he should stay at home.

"Because my wife was in a division much busier than I was when she got pregnant, I naturally came to think that it was my turn to take leave," Yamada recalls.

Faced with one of the world's lowest birth rates, Japan offers generous one-year paid leave for all new parents in the hope of making child-rearing more attractive.

But the incentives are not working. The population last year fell for the first time since World War II. One problem, experts say, is that Japanese men are not pitching in at home as they are

expected to be loyal first to the office.

Yamada, who has returned to work but continues to drop his children at school, says he faced a hostile reaction when he told his boss he planned to take paternity leave.

“‘Are you serious?’ That’s what my direct supervisor told me. Although I’d been talking about my plan of taking a paternity leave for almost a year since my wife conceived, he didn’t take my words seriously at all,” Yamada recalls with a look half amused and half sad.

Domestic helpers are expensive and uncommon in Japan, which strictly controls unskilled foreign labour. Yamada’s wife took an obligatory eight weeks off after giving birth but then rushed back to her office.

More than 70% of eligible mothers applied for their full year maternity leave in the 2003 fiscal year, although many complain that their jobs disappear once they attempt to return to work.

By contrast, a mere 0.56% of fathers applied for paternity leave, according to the labour ministry.

“‘Maybe it’s because a lot of people believe that taking leave could hurt your career in the Japanese working culture where people are expected to show loyalty to one organisation in a lifetime-employment system,’” Yamada says.

“‘Indeed, after I returned to work in November, some members of parliament who really cared about me came to ask, ‘Mr Yamada, are your prospects for promotion all right?’”

After toiling in the cut-throat atmosphere of one of Japan’s elite ministries, Yamada thought being a stay-at-home dad would be child’s play. Instead, he nearly had a nervous breakdown.

“‘Despite the fact we already had twins, I had been a workaholic who was ready to work 24 hours a day, a species quite frequently seen in the central government’s bureaucracy,’” he recalls.

“‘The first two months were mentally tough, terribly so,’” he says of his paternity leave, during which he was also in charge of taking the twins to and from school.

Every night Yamada had a dream in which he was back in his old element, working furiously in the office. “‘And I enjoyed it very much. Then I would wake up in the morning and realise, disappointed, that today was again yet another day of child-rearing,’” he says.

“‘I missed having conversations with adults. Furthermore, a baby suddenly does things that are totally impossible to understand.

“‘At your workplace, even the least competent subordinate can understand your words. My baby doesn’t. Child-rearing requires a part of brain cells completely different from that used for working,’” he says.

But by the sixth month of his child-care leave, Yamada found himself in awe of his son's growth, which was noticeable in little ways every day.

"There are three things that changed me after taking leave. I became more generous, efficient and multi-dimensional," says Yamada.

He became more understanding of his colleagues' failures after dealing with the more severe case of his baby, through whom he witnessed "a lot of unreasonable incidents, such as vomiting all of a sudden."

Japan enacted a child-rearing leave law in 1992 which was amended in 2001 to ban discrimination against employees who took breaks to raise children, regardless of gender.

Masako Atsumi, a lawyer who served on a government panel on equal employment, says the issue is not overt discrimination but corporate culture.

"There is strong peer pressure in the business world which is dominated by men," adds Atsumi, who heads the government-backed Centre for the Advancement of Working Women.

Yamada says he has changed his mind, particularly after spending time with his "mama-friends" – stay-at-home mothers whose first concerns are their everyday lives.

"Bureaucrats in the central government tend to think that your job is the most important thing in the world. That kind of short-sightedness could lead people to take the wrong direction. Thanks to my mama-friends," he says, "now I feel I have an objective view on my own job." – AFP

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