

Affordable and safe housing for single mothers in Japan

Organisation implementing the project

[Little Ones](#) is a non-profit organisation in Japan established in 2008 by Koyama Kuniyoshi, a Japanese social activist, that works with and supports single parent families - the majority of which (90 per cent) are single mothers - in improving their living conditions. It also raises public awareness on the issue of child poverty. It is based in Tokyo and employs 10 staff members and 25 volunteers.

It provides various types of support to single parent families:

1. Living support - providing a free helpline, emergency packages such as food or clothing, and legal advice to domestic violence victims.
2. Employment support - offering employment training or writing a recommendation letter to help single parents gain employment.
3. Housing support - offering affordable housing, either shared housing or a room in an apartment building, to single mothers and their children. Little Ones owns two houses and four apartments and has partnered with a company that operates private shared housing for women in Tokyo.
4. Informational support - providing information on governmental support and helpful tips/advice for single mothers.

Experience support - organising free events for single parents and children such as barbecues, Christmas parties, or excursions to museums. These events also provide opportunities for single parents to share their experiences and support each other.

Project Description

The project renovates abandoned or unoccupied houses, known as 'akiya' in Japanese, to create affordable homes for single mothers. It does this by working with property owners, real estate agents and the government to acquire the empty private houses to renovate and rent out. Since 2013, over 200 single mothers have been housed in Tokyo, Osaka and Chiba prefectures¹.

In 2017 alone, the project supported over 1,300 single mothers and renovated and rented out 68 homes to single mothers across Japan.

Aims and Objectives

Single mothers and their children suffer stigma and are often refused tenancies on the assumption of being financially unreliable. The project aims to address the problems single mothers face by making use of 'akiya' within cities, providing them access to affordable homes and living support.

¹ A prefecture is a political region or administrative area. Japan has 47 different prefectures.

Little Ones' goal is to eliminate housing poverty amongst single-mother households. This project is working towards creating a regional mechanism which would enable every single mother to find and choose an affordable home in Japan.

Context

Some 14 per cent of Japanese homes, around nine million dwellings, are sitting vacant. This is expected to reach 30 per cent in 2030 as the country's population continues to decline². Many of these homes have been inherited by people who have no use for them and yet are unable to sell, because of a shortage of interested buyers. In 2015, a new Vacant Houses law³ was passed to promote the demolition and reuse of abandoned houses. But there are many cases where the owners are unknown or insolvent and, in these instances, taxpayers end up footing the bill for demolition. Given the financial constraints in dismantling thousands of 'akiya', the government has begun reusing them as affordable rental housing for low-income individuals and families. The process has been slow. Only a few 'akiya' owners gave permission for the government to re-use their houses. Additionally, any buildings suitable for affordable housing need to meet the government's earthquake resistance standard regulations. The buildings which meet these standards are usually in high demand, can be rented on a commercial basis, and therefore are not available.

Japan has a culture that makes it difficult for women to work after having children and that makes life exceptionally harder for single mothers. Moreover, nearly 80 per cent of divorces in Japan result in full custody for the mother and there is no system to enforce child support payments⁴. Many single mothers are often unable to work or can only do so minimally. In addition, a culture of shame means they are looked down upon which has led many single mothers to hide their situation, even from friends and family. Such prejudices have an adverse impact on the country's children. Sixteen percent of Japanese children live below the poverty line, according to Health Ministry statistics, but among working single-parent households, the rate hits 54 per cent⁵. A large proportion of these children are from households of single mothers.

Apartment owners often refuse single mothers as tenants on the assumption that they are not financially reliable. When they do find a place to live within a reasonable commuting distance, they often end up paying half of their income for rent and they are simply unable to support themselves and their children. This is particularly the case in Tokyo and other big cities in Japan where rent is so high. This difficult context highlights the importance of Little Ones' project which is providing affordable housing and living support for single mothers and their children by reusing empty homes.

² <https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/japan-looks-to-put-more-abandoned-property-to-use>

³ <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/japan-new-law-and-tax-measure-to-promote-demolition-and-reuse-of-abandoned-houses/>

⁴ <https://www.childandfamilyblog.com/child-development/japanese-children-single-parent-families-disadvantaged/>

⁵ There are 1.24 million single-mother households in Japan and 223,000 headed by single fathers. Of the total, 54 per cent have incomes that set them below the poverty line — the highest rate in the developed world. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/11/07/business/no-relief-sight-japans-poor-single-parent-families/#.Ww_MCO4vxUQ

Key Features

Little Ones seeks out vacant private houses in urban areas from local government, apartment owners, or property companies. They work together to renovate and turn them into affordable housing for single mothers. Little Ones primarily works with the following organisations in delivering the project:

- The Department of Housing in Tokyo metropolitan government provides the grant for renovating the empty properties directly to the property owner. It has created a database of vacant houses providing information for the public to promote the reuse of these properties. It also connects Little Ones with building professionals such as registered architects for the renovation works.
- The Ministry of Land Infrastructure and Transport creates and oversees the legal framework for housing support and subsidises the renovation of empty properties. It is also obligated to financially support local governments' administrative efforts on the issues covered in the Vacant Houses law.
- A local real estate company provides information on the empty property and helps arrange the legal documents.
- A non-profit organisation providing addiction recovery gives advice on how to look after single mothers suffering from mental illness and addiction.

The [Tokyo metropolitan government or local ward governments](#) provides grants for property owners wanting to refurbish or renovate 'akiya' and rent it out to low-income tenants. In order to receive the grant, the owner is required to:

- present all documents proving ownership of the property;
- work with the local government or housing support organisation throughout the process;
- renovate the house in compliance with modern earthquake safety regulations;
- agree to give tenancy to low-income people (homeless, elderly, single mother or disabled people).

The grant covers two-thirds of the renovation costs and is paid to the property owner who is responsible for doing the renovation works. Little Ones helps owners in writing or filling in their grant application forms. The local government appoints an organisation who will manage the property and provide support to the tenants. In this project, Little Ones are managing the properties that have been renovated and rented out to single mothers.

Tenants do not participate in the renovation, design or building process. However, they are very much involved in making their room or new home comfortable. They can also seek support from the project when moving house, purchasing home electrical appliances and fitting crime-prevention devices.

Little Ones works with any single mother that comes to them for support. In order to determine provision of support, the following factors are considered:

- Income - Does she have a job or enough income to support herself and her child(ren)? Little Ones mainly considers income as the amount the single mother earns by working and excludes savings, government subsidies and welfare services.
- Health - Does she have a mental or terminal illness? Is her child healthy?

Communication - Does she understand and keep to the contract agreement?

Funding

Annual running costs of the project are USD\$18,800. These are met by local government grants and donations. In some cases, property owners pay consultancy fees for Little Ones' services.

Little Ones receive about USD\$30,000 of cash donations per year from private companies, long-time supporters, and individuals. It currently plans to raise USD\$80,000 for the project via a golf tournament fundraising activity.

Property owners bear the costs of renovating the 'akiya' or vacant house with subsidies from the government. The national and local governments work together to provide the financial assistance with each bearing a third of the renovation costs of up to USD\$4,400 per 'akiya'.

Tenants pay rental fees costing around USD\$450 to USD\$640 per month which is 10 - 20 per cent less than market rental values.

Innovation

Research has indicated how marginalised single mothers are in Japan which highlights the importance of this work. The project is the first in Japan to provide affordable housing for single mothers and their children by making use of unoccupied or abandoned houses in urban areas. It connects property owners, real estate agents and the government and empowers single mothers to improve their living conditions. It also supports the owners of empty properties to access government grants in order to carry out the renovations. Support networks are created and the project is helping to change misconceptions of a vulnerable group in this country.

Environmental Impact

Earthquake risks combined with hefty inheritance tax and rapidly updating technology has led to a "scrap and build" culture in Japan. Simply knocking down houses and constructing again has been long favoured which is neither environmentally nor financially sustainable⁶. This project presents an environmentally sustainable alternative to a wasteful practice by reusing abandoned homes and turning them into affordable housing for low-income single mothers.

Reinforced concrete is the main building material in the renovation to strengthen the house's resistance against earthquakes. The local government of Tokyo connects Little Ones with a 'first-class' registered architect (plays a dual role of architect and building engineer in Japan) who provides the inspection and approval of the renovation works. This ensures the renovation complies with the building standards and modern earthquake regulations.

Financial Sustainability

Little Ones offers a membership scheme for individuals and companies that want to support single mothers and their children. It has over 1,300 members mainly in Tokyo metropolitan area. Membership fee costs USD\$30 per year.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/disposable-homes-japan-environment-lifespan-sustainability>

The rental fees are 10 – 20 per cent less than market rental values. There are also cases when the property owner offers the tenants half the price of market rental values or even free of charge. When a tenant cannot afford to pay the rent, Little Ones negotiates with the owner to lower the price.

Tenants can also pay rent by instalments. Little Ones acts as a guarantor and pays the full rental fee to the owner in advance. The tenants can then pay for those fees on an instalment plan. Tenants usually pay them back within three months.

Social Impact

By providing an integrated housing and living support, the project enables single mothers and their children to live a stable healthy life. Tenants have a rental contract for two years and can request for an extension of the tenancy. For tenants who have difficulty in paying the rent, the project offers them support in two ways:

- Providing career coaching or linking them up with companies to secure a new stable job. Little Ones have established relationships with private companies who are keen to build their brands around social impact. The project provides opportunities for companies to hear opinions of their product or services directly from customers, i.e. single mothers, or create a CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) project or activity to support single mothers and children.
- Paying the rent on an instalment plan. Little Ones has a good relationship with its tenants and meets up with them monthly. This regular interaction allows them to offer help prior to the onset of a tenant's financial difficulty. In its six years of working in this project, all tenants have so far met their rental payments.

In cases where a single mother has serious mental health problems, Little Ones seeks help from the government for a social worker and collaborates with them to help her. While the government and social worker provide social welfare benefits and services, Little Ones provides the single mother with housing, employment and educational support.

As well as housing, Little Ones offers opportunities for single mothers and their children to meet up in the community, exchange information and develop a support network. In 2016, Little Ones also built a one-stop online information service "[Kominona](#)" for single mothers to easily access information such as job opportunities, housing availability, children's schools, etc.

The project also provides a 'win-win' scenario for property owners. They get to renovate their unwanted properties with financial support from the government and contribute to tackling the issues of empty properties and child poverty. Moreover, they will gain income through rental payments, instead of having to pay the required property tax on vacant houses (*kotei-shi-zan*⁷) each year.

Little Ones has helped make the Vacant Houses law feasible through this project. The central government realised that providing affordable housing for single mothers is important. The local ward governments in Tokyo have welcomed and recommended Little Ones' housing project to single mothers. An increasing number of local governments in Japan have started to offer more support to single mothers who need affordable housing.

⁷ For some 'akiya' owners, it is more beneficial to keep the houses, even if they are in bad condition, because the land property tax rate is reduced for land that has a house on it. If the owner of the land demolishes the house on it, the property tax rate will go up. See <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/japan-new-law-and-tax-measure-to-promote-demolition-and-reuse-of-abandoned-houses/>

Barriers

The main barrier is the stigma of single mothers in Japan which leads them and their children to live in poverty. Little Ones has been working hard to educate the public, property owners and real estate agents to remove misconceptions about single mothers.

Another barrier is funding. Despite providing a discounted rental fee to single mothers there is still a need for housing aid due to very high rental costs particularly in big cities such as Tokyo. Little Ones is currently advocating for the government to create a framework for rental assistance for single parent families.

Lessons learned

There is not enough practice in Japan that provides affordable housing especially for low-income single mothers. Over the years, the government has mainly relied on public or low-income housing, which is very difficult to access and too old to use.

Evaluation

Little Ones has been acknowledged as a “housing support organisation” by Tokyo metropolitan government. The project has also been evaluated by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport and recognised nationally as a good practice for using empty properties to house single mothers. Because of this recognition, it is much easier to work with local governments and negotiate with property owners and real estate agents.

Recognition

The project has raised the issue of housing for single parent families as important. It has been recognised by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport as a model case in providing integrated housing and living support for single mothers whilst tackling the serious issue of empty properties across the country. The government currently encourages and subsidises the scheme.

The project, as well as the work of Little Ones, has been featured in two newspapers, one journal, and two academic papers (all are written in Japanese).

- <http://social-house.net/archives/33>
- <http://www.alterna.co.jp/24509>

Little Ones has welcomed visitors such as university researchers and the local media to their project areas. Media from Korea, USA and France have also come to see their work.

Transfer

Having been recognised as a model case by the national government, Little Ones has begun to scale up their approach in other cities in Japan such as Osaka and Chiba. It has partnered with several real estate agencies which support single mothers to find affordable housing. This has helped to find follow-on housing for two single mothers in Osaka and ten single mothers in Chiba in 2018.

Little Ones is keen to share its experience with others around the world who work with low-income single mothers to gain access to safe and affordable housing or are tackling empty properties.
