

My name is Rachel Endo, mother of two children who were abducted by their father to Japan. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story here today.

I am here today to express my support for House Bill 947: Family Law – Joint Custody.

I have personally witnessed – and continue to struggle – with the ill effects of sole custody. What is even worse, is the negative effect it has had on my two young daughters. It is because of this I continue to advocate for change to sole custody laws in the US and Japan as part of my volunteer work with NGO Keep Our Kids Home and NGO Find My Parent.

In February 2019, my husband and I litigated custody, and I was awarded full physical custody and joint legal custody of my daughters in the United States. My husband wanted to take our daughters on visitation to his native Japan, but because, to date, Japan does not recognize joint custody and fails to return abducted children, I was not in agreement. My husband and I took the matter to the courts in Maryland where a judge ruled that my husband could indeed take Miyu and Amane on visitation to Japan even though I plead with the judge to consider how the sole custody law in Japan would allow my husband to kidnap the girls.

My worst fear would become a reality when my husband refused to return my daughters home to the United States and cut off all ties with me. It was because Japan only legally recognizes sole custody that my husband was able to get away with this. Had joint custody laws been in place, my daughters would have been safe and had access to both their parents.

I was lucky to win a Habeas Corpus case in Tokyo High Court to get my daughters returned home – this rarely happens, especially for foreign parents in Japan. However, the socio-economic and psychological effects the situation has had on my daughters and on our lives is something we continue to struggle with today.

Miyu and Amane were taught to hate me and America - to hate half of their identity and culture. Miyu was forced by her father to write a letter to the courts stating why she hated me so much when she was just 8 years old. She would write in her journal how much she didn't want to write this letter and how ashamed and sad she was when she found out her father posted it on social media for me and the world to see. It is because of the sole-custody only system that my ex-husband was able to brainwash and manipulate my children. Yes, this may be a case of international divorce, but such scenarios are not uncommon here when two Americans divorce.

I have seen firsthand how sole custody can damage children and cause great damage to the ever-so-important bond between a parent and a child. It is also because of the Japanese family law system which assumes that sole custody is in the best interest of the child that I was pushed into severe debt fighting to get my girls back. This debt meant that when Miyu and Amane were reunited with me in the America, we had to live in a homeless shelter for more than 6 months and continue to live on government supported housing accommodations today. Once again, my young daughters had to pay the heavy price for a lack of joint custody legislation and this is a price they will likely pay for the rest of their lives. Children in single parent households are more

likely to perform worse at school, suffer from mental health problems and have worse health outcomes.

As long as joint custody is not considered the default – in the best interest of children – parents will continue to have long and expensive divorce and child custody proceedings, only causing harm to the children. That is why it is crucial for the state of Maryland to protect the best interests of children and ensure that joint custody is the default arrangement so long as the child is not in danger.

And when the child expresses any fear towards a parent, trained child psychologists must properly evaluate the children to understand the root of this fear and whether it's related to abuse or brainwashing by the other parent.

It is crucial that the State of Maryland do everything in its power to ensure a positive future for our children and that will be achieved by protecting a child's right to both parents. This is why, again, I come here today to express my support for House Bill 947: Family Law – Joint Custody.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my story with you today.