

THE ZEIT GIST

Shelter reaches out to abuse victims

The issue of domestic violence in Japan still doesn't receive the attention it deserves

By RACHEL ALLEN

Her hands were clenched into fists, and patches of lightened skin mottled her skin up to her elbows. Addressing the four foreign women sitting in the office of the domestic violence shelter in Okayama City, the young woman quietly told us of the years of abuse she endured at the hands of her husband.

The associated stress from the abuse had caused her joints to stop functioning properly, and prompted various other mental and physical problems. She had made her way to the shelter five days earlier, and the night before she had slept soundly for the first time in two years. This was her small victory, and the quiet voice of domestic abuse that previously would have been silent.

Domestic violence (DV) is not rare in Japan, but what is rare is that a woman in her position would have access to a shelter for DV victims.

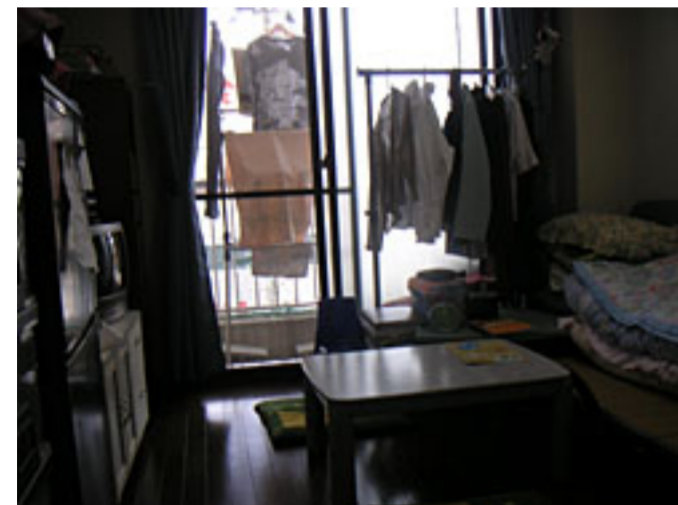
This nation of nearly 130 million residents has only 40 designated domestic violence shelters. Most of these are found in the metropolitan areas of Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka. As the government offers little funding for shelters, most operate as NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), NPOs (nonprofit organizations), or through Christian relief agencies.

Before the first domestic violence prevention law was passed in 2001, most of the attention given to the issue of abused women in Japan focused on sex workers and the victims of human trafficking.

Every year, thousands of women from countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan and Brazil come to Japan to work in the entertainment industry. Many women are misled into the type of work they will do, or accrue debts from their employers that force them to work for little pay. Some who have good jobs become victims of abuse when their work visa nears expiration.

The best-known facility in Japan for abused women, Housing in Emergency of Love and Peace (HELP) in Tokyo, has received much attention in the media for efforts within the foreign and Japanese communities.

In the international media, HELP is typically linked to trafficked women, though it now serves a broad spectrum of abuse victims. Despite focusing on those needs specific to Tokyo, this shelter and others are paving the way for smaller shelters to gain a foothold in other cities and towns across the country.



Sankaku Navi provides temporary housing and apartments, as well as counseling services, for victims of domestic violence.

Outside of the largest urban areas, domestic abuse victims have limited facilities. Though churches and groups such as YMCA may offer shelter to families in need, dozens of large cities do not have any shelters designated for DV victims.

In the capital of Okayama Prefecture, there is one such facility that provides temporary housing and counseling services.

Sankaku Navi is a small NPO operated by a staff of volunteers and relies on private donations of cash and services. In the two years since it opened, the office has at times been overwhelmed with women seeking shelter, help and advice.

The shelter has four donated rooms available, including one in a safe building with occasional police protection. The rooms are available for a day, a month or a year.

I first heard about the shelter last year, when a local English-language newsletter wrote about the fledgling shelter and the difficulties it was facing. Together with about 100 foreign teachers working through the JET Programme in my prefecture, we began fundraising for the shelter so that we could support an existing Japanese organization that served a great need in our community.

According to the founder, Miyoko Kaihara, using an NPO approach is the only way that a shelter such as Sankaku Navi can currently exist, but depending on private funding is risky.

A different shelter in Hiroshima city was forced to close in 2005, and the Okayama shelter also finds itself in financial straits.

In quiet, conservative Okayama city, Sankaku Navi does not deal specifically with an influx of abused hostesses and trafficked women as a shelter in Tokyo would, but a large number of women seeking help are foreigners.

In common, however, with its urban counterparts, the shelter is seeing an increasing number of Japanese women. Many women who come to the office do not need housing, but rather education and support in order to make a change to an abusive situation.

Domestic violence has only really been publicly acknowledged as a problem in Japan in the past five years. The Law for the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims was passed in 2001, and amended in 2004. It is the first law of its kind in Japan, but it falls short of affecting any long-term change.

The law permits women to get a restraining order against her husband or abuser for a period of six months, but renewals are difficult. The husband can be required to leave for a period of two weeks, after which he typically keeps the residence.

In the absence of adequate shelter facilities, a battered woman's only option is to move in with family or friends. This may be difficult for a single woman, who would be shunned in many social circles and blamed for marital problems.

Furthermore, foreign women who marry Japanese men do not have family nearby and are hindered by language and cultural barriers.

Given the wide chasm between private and public life, speaking out about the issue is a potential minefield. Tracking abuse and measuring the need for DV laws is made more difficult by lack of accurate data.

The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare cites statistics on domestic violence significantly lower than some private and university research studies.

Though domestic violence has been a hot topic for decades in developed countries such as England, Australia, and the United States, the cultural definitions of what constitutes abuse and what constitutes family business can be vastly different.

Domestic violence is uniquely problematic in Japan as it intersects communities of Japanese and foreign residents. A Japanese woman who is abused may not speak out if she does not believe the violence to be abnormal, or if she sees it as her duty to keep her family matters private. A foreign woman who marries into a Japanese family may be more inclined to speak against abuse, though she also may be prevented from leaving her abuser due to financial and legal circumstances.

Issues of control and gender inequality within the family unit that lead to abuse can only be addressed if a victim chooses to seek help.

In November of this year, there was a national symposium on domestic violence in Sapporo. This symposium helped to highlight the issue of domestic violence on a greater scale.

If domestic violence is ignored as a women's issue, and is not given more attention by national and community lawmakers, those victims of DV across the country will remain in danger. Considering how deeply this issue also affects foreign people in Japan, it should not be treated as an issue to only be addressed within the Japanese family unit.

Send comments to: community@japantimes.co.jp

GOT A STORY FOR THE COMMUNITY PAGE? TELL US AND GET CASH. E-MAIL:
community@japantimes.co.jp