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Homelessness in Women as viewed from Stephouse

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Introduction

I would like to report on female homelessness from the perspective of a homeless centre. I would ask that you understand that there is a limit to what I can report, as this is not a report by a person who is directly involved with the welfare of street people.

According to the statistics of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, women make up 3.7% of all the homeless in the whole country. I want to focus on the following questions: are there really only a small number of women homeless, and why are they invisible?

1. On the definition of “a homeless person”

* “A homeless person is a person who lives their daily life in a municipal park, a river, a street, a station or any other public space without reason.” (The Law Concerning Special Measure for the Support to Self-support of the Homeless etc. 2002)

* The Tokyo Metropolitan Counseling Center for Women distinguishes between “a woman who has no fixed residence” and “a homeless woman”, stating that;

— “a woman who has no fixed residence” is a woman who has lost her home due to becoming unemployed etc.

— “a homeless woman” is a woman who lives outside.

* Below are some examples of women who have used Stephouse.

① One woman was a victim of DV and had escaped abroad with her child. She returned to Japan to give her child a good education. However, wherever she went she was found by her husband. Finally he took the child and she became an itinerant. In the end, she was taken under state protection after she was found having attempted suicide on a ship bound for an isolated island.

- ② One woman attempted suicide. Though she had been employed for ten years or more, she was dismissed. She had borrowed money several times to pay her rent and despaired of the future.
- ③ One woman was taken under state protection after her fourth emergency hospital admission. She had been working to pay her hospital expenses, even though she was seriously ill.
- ④ One woman was taken under protection having run away from home because of sexual violence from her father. She had become a prostitute.
- ⑤ One woman went from one facility to another because of difficulties in her relationships with other facility occupants.

It can be seen from these examples that there are many people who become homeless not “without reason” but “for some reason” and that it is impossible to distinguish between “homeless” and “person of no fixed residence” .

According to experts, a person will tend to commit suicide within a month of their hope being lost; if they survive that month, then they will survive. However, there are a number of cases in which women end up living for a longer time. Women generally will try to work as a cleaner, a maid, an employee in a restaurant and so on, as they don't have strong desires to be briefcase carrying office workers. I suppose that men, in contrast, lose both family and face when they are dismissed from a company. Therefore, I think this remark about suicide within a month is more applicable to men. Moreover, young men have no place to go when they lose their jobs and accommodation. Furthermore they have lived, to some degree, in privilege and lack the experience of doing “dirty work” .

2. Compared with the past situation

From 1998 to 2000, HELP received homeless people when many lived in makeshift houses made of corrugated cardboard around the west exit of Shinjuku Station. In those days, tents of blue sheets stood in rows in the neighboring parks.

1 Most of the women visitors stayed only for a few days. They came to HELP after complaining of a blister on their foot or phoned to ask for shelter from the rain. On arriving, they showered, changed their clothes, had a meal and went back out. There was almost no difference between Japanese and foreign residents.

2 There was a call from a woman who was staying at a hotel. She said she wanted to die. We asked her the reason when she visited us and she explained that she had severe toothache. In another case, a woman who had a stomachache visited us. We contacted a welfare center and she was able to have treatment under the medical protection scheme.

3 A woman gave birth in her tent.

4 A woman attempted suicide in the river. She was a stateless person and HIV positive. She wanted to return to her country, but could not.

In those days, women also lived in houses made of corrugated cardboard or in the blue sheet tents, though they were not safe from danger. HELP, in a way, was an alternative to an internet café.

3. Is there no “poverty” in Japan?

With the removal of the corrugated cardboard houses and the blue sheet tents and the moving of the homeless to lodging facilities, the homeless disappeared from public view. However, in recent years, with the depression deepening, our society became aware of how serious the situation was through the appearance of a tent village and the increase of homeless men. Till then, the homeless had been hidden from the public eye and the Government of Japan had declared that, in contrast with other countries, there was no “poverty” in Japan. Though there were few women homeless in Hibiya Park, and other parks which had been opened for the reception of the unemployed and persons of no fixed residence, the number of women staying over night in late-night cafés etc. was increasing.

4. The second generation of recipients of livelihood protection

Present-day employment problems are as follows; either one cannot get regular employment or one loses regular employment, shifting to part-time or temporary employment. In the depression, such cases are increasing. In addition, we begin to see people unable to pay their rent and losing their home because of unemployment. As a result, the number of people who have insufficient food continues to increase. Moreover, there are fewer job offers to young people and junior or senior high school graduates (the rate of employment is 50%).

As a result, 25% of recipients of livelihood protection are the second generation of welfare recipients. The gap in society between the rich and the poor is deepening: the rich can go on to a university, while the poor become increasingly poor and can't afford an education.

5. Why are homeless women invisible?

① Characteristics of homeless women

* The percentage of female regular employees is lower compared with that of men. (Most women workers are part-time employees and half of women workers are irregularly employed. Women's wages are 40 percent of men's wages.) Moreover, few women can receive unemployment insurance. Unmarried women are, so to speak, 'future homeless'. As the belief has been widespread in companies and in our society that women should stay at home to take care of their husbands and children, women have either been unemployed or their employment has been limited to subordinate jobs to earn additional income.

* Wives keep house and take charge of the children, since their husbands must work long

hours or commute from suburbs where they can rent cheap apartments.

- * Wives must leave their children in the care of a child minder in the neighborhood and work as part-timers because of lack of child care. Thus, women are liable to be dismissed.

- * Homeless women tend to spend their time in internet or all night cafés, since living outdoors is dangerous. If women have no money, they have no option but to go with a man whom they feel they can trust.

- * I hear that there are women who choose to be homeless for various reasons. (The same goes for homeless men.)

- they are reluctant to stay at accommodations, because they are afraid their scanty though valuable belongings will be stolen.

- they don't want to live away from their pets.

- they want to control their lives, for example mealtimes. They want a certain degree of freedom.

- they can't sleep well when they share a room at accommodations.

- they are unwilling to disclose the details of their private lives to welfare agencies.

② In comparison with homeless men

- * It is dangerous for women to live outdoors. Most homeless women are victims of sexual violence or sexual harassment. However, some women say that a homeless woman is safer than a woman living in an apartment house. They think that someone would come if a homeless woman were to cry for help, whereas neighbors in an apartment house would tend to ignore her.

- * Homeless women tend to make every effort to do everything on their own till they become ill or attempt suicide. They take their own responsibilities seriously.

- * Homeless women perceived prejudicially by both themselves and society are apt to suffer from self-reproach and helplessness thinking, in the case of DV victims, that they have failed to be good housewives and mothers.

- * Measures that may be taken for the relief of homeless women tend not to be pursued (as much as in the case for men) as it is assumed that women can work as prostitutes.

- * Unemployment of men is regarded as a serious matter in comparison with unemployment of women.

- * Women applicants for a job are judged not by their ability but by their looks.

- * In the case of DV victims, women have to run away with nothing, since their husbands control everything. Mostly, such husbands don't like their wives to go to work. Therefore, the wives have a deep fear of going out alone into the world. Thus, the wives don't have enough information and tend to stay at home out of fear that their husbands might find them in their house, hospitals, work places etc.

- * Certain women come to live with a man whom they feel they can trust, since they feel anxiety and loneliness when they live by themselves. However, in most cases, they end up leaving home because of exploitation or violence by their partner. In general, such women fall into a pattern of this kind of behavior.

- * Victims of sexual abuse are mostly women. In the case of victims of sexual abuse by persons who are closely related, such as their father and brother, their sufferings last for life.

Mistrust and fear of men become habitual.

Women are always discriminated against with regard to the level of wages because they are women (even in the case of regular employees). In the case of female led single parent families, many live in poverty below the standards for livelihood protection and mothers are forced to work hard. This kind of situation makes the neglect of children by mothers inevitable, leading to family break ups. Moreover, mothers sometimes get ill through overwork and the children are separated from their mother. Such economic instability exerts a deep influence on children. They perform poorly in their studies so don't have much interest in them. This influences employment after graduation and they become second generation recipients of livelihood protection. Additionally, it is possible for them to become homeless owing to a sense of being a dropout, since they are not well-educated and lack confidence in themselves. Such a situation increases social unrest. In the highly competitive atmosphere to be found in Japanese schools, children of families in which there is DV, children of alcoholics and survivors of child abuse tend to score low and drop out.

The percentage of poor in Japan is 14.3%; one in seven is poor. However, the percentage of poor single parent families is 54.3%; half of them are poor. The average annual income of single mothers is 2130,000 yen, while the average annual income of families with children is 7020,000 yen. A third of children whose mothers work as contract workers on contracts of less than one year are poor. In 1997, the number of children who couldn't pay for educational materials (a first year student in primary school—350,000 yen, in junior high school—480,000 yen, in high school—620,000 yen) and for school meals, and needed a school expense subsidy was 780,000. However, recent figures show that the number of children who need a school expense subsidy has risen to 1420,000 (2007), suggesting that the number of poor children has doubled.

Among young people, there is a trend towards hopelessness and an increase in those who feel no motivation to carry on living. Mr. Makoto Yuasa has analyzed the cause of this and has indicated that regardless of sex, such young people don't have "reserves". If they have something, such as the support of their family, an education, savings, friends etc., they can summon enough motivation to live. However, if they don't, they tend to commit suicide.

6. Poverty of administration policy

① It is said that child abuse is caused by poverty and social isolation. For instance, people who have lived in children's homes account for 12% of people who don't go to high school and 19% of high school dropouts. It seems that they constitute a large percentage of those who are displaced to internet cafés.

It is certain that homelessness is caused by the poverty of the administration policy, our national administration should guarantee that we can live as human beings and without anxiety.

It would not be necessary for even the people who choose to be homeless to live out of doors, if they can secure a house no matter how small it is. The motto "no work, no dinner" loses its

meaning today. Food and shelter for the unemployed should be secured first.

It is not a straightforward procedure to be a recipient of livelihood protection and the government's 'second safety net', a housing allowance and emergency fund, is hard to use. Moreover, even existent laws are not executed effectively.

② Most people stick to the idea of “self-responsibility”, since “human rights education” is not conducted in Japan. They think “I am wrong” or “he/she is wrong”. In addition, it seems that there are a lot of women who suffer in silence, since human rights education about sexual discrimination is still lacking.

③ Some kind of countermeasures are necessary for people who cannot bear the impersonality and isolation of our current society. What should be done to help them to accept themselves?

④ Some kind of countermeasures are also necessary for people without “reserves”.

In particular, I think it is an urgent task to break the cycle of livelihood protection recipients and prevent suicides.

(Kaoru Yoshitani and Alison Gray collaborated in the translation of this issue.)

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