



Earthquakes and Women

A Look back on the 10 years following the Great Hanshin Earthquake

Reiko Masai

Ten years have passed since the Great Hanshin Earthquake. Various projects of reconstruction have been held in Hyogo prefecture. Disaster prevention forums have been also held at various places, but many of their panelists were dominated by male engineering specialists. Studies of the earthquake from a woman's point of view are very limited, and, in particular, "earthquake and women" has hardly been discussed.

In the summer of 1995, the Kinki Bar Association held a big symposium named "Human rights in devastated area." In the thick stack of handouts, there were items discussing "Human rights of the disabled, the elderly, children, and foreigners," but no items about women's human rights. The mere one sentence about women said "there was a rumor that a woman was raped, but Hyogo police announced that there was no rape case in existence and denied it as a false rumor."

In Sri Lanka, which was devastated by tsunami in December 2004, a women's group coalition urged the Ministry of Women's Affairs to promote women in managing positions for the shelters, and to protect victimized women's rights because some women had become victims of sexual abuse in the shelters. The women of the coalition were said to have conducted a survey of the conditions of shelters by themselves on January 7, 2005. I was greatly impressed with their prompt reaction to the situation, and I recall the situation of women in the devastated

area of the Great Hanshin Earthquake 10 years ago.

Poverty of Elderly Women

I wonder if people noticed the fact that female casualties exceeded male casualties by over a thousand in the earthquake? The figure reported on May 8, 1995 showed the death toll of women was 3,294 and men 2,199. It was reported that 5,000 people (right after the earthquake) were killed, but not many people care about the fact that 1,000 more women than men were killed. I, as a woman, would like to take this fact seriously.

The aftermath of the earthquake also involves the issue of poverty. In other words, the earthquake revealed the poverty of people called "social minorities," such as the elderly, the disabled, immigrant workers, and women.

What made me feel resentful was the unfair fact that women's wage is half of men's. That's why women, especially elderly women, are poor, which greatly affected the damages women suffered in the earthquake. In the middle of March 1995, I visited 8 shelters, located mainly in the Suma district of Kobe city, to talk with elderly women sitting around in a dark gymnasium during the day. Many of them were in their 70s and 80s, and they had been working in jobs such as janitors for a long time, as far as their physical strength allowed. However, some were fired due to the economic depression that happened several



years ago, and others could not keep working because of a loss of their health. Consequently, they had to live in cheap rented apartments with little pension and/or welfare.

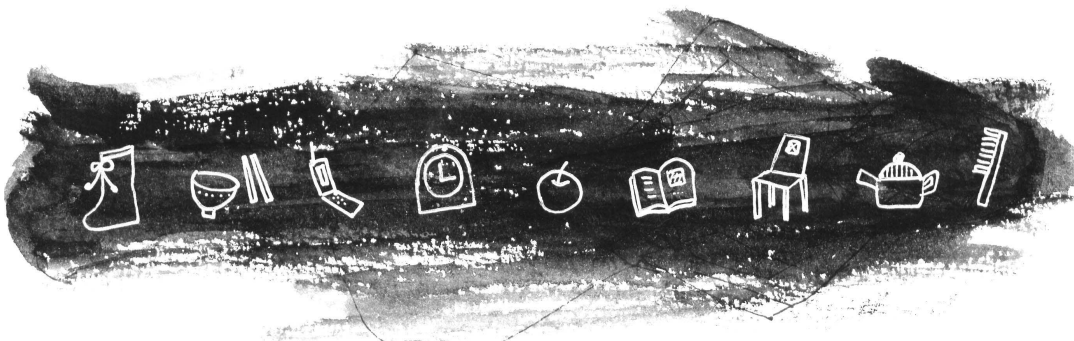
They said that house rental at the time was 10,000 to 15,000 yen (US\$100 to 150), amazingly cheap. They were living in a cheap low-quality housing complex where they had no bathroom and had to share a lavatory. Then the earthquake happened. Around that time, the monthly pension for men was 190,000 yen (US\$1,900) and for women was 100,000 yen (US\$1,000), if you had been working for 25 years until then. It is unfair that women have to face such poor lives when they get older. I felt upset about the reality that single women never get enough pension money to guarantee a secure life.

Single-Mother Headed Household's Income is 30% of Median Household Income

According to a report released by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, the average income of single-mother headed household is 30% that of median household income, while that of single-father headed household is 70%. Consequently, many single-mother headed families were living in the low-quality housing complexes, which were similar to the elderly women's situations. Then they were badly affected by the earthquake.

The housing for single-mother families in Kobe (private-run) was destroyed by the earthquake, and a total of 5 people, including mothers and children, were killed. I visited the Kobe municipal housing for single-mother families, "Hiyodori-so," where survivors were residing temporarily. This housing complex was also an old building. I couldn't understand why it hadn't been destroyed. Each household had one room of 4.5 tatami-mats (about 7.3 m²), with a small sink. There was a fence outside the window instead of a veranda. It was very sad that this could be the last home for the women. (Recently, single-mother support facilities are gradually reformed and improved, but I have heard that many decrepit facilities are still used without being reformed all over Japan.)

For single women, it is usually difficult to rent a house. It became even more difficult after the earthquake because there was no available housing due to damage from the earthquake. One single woman in her 30s told me that she hardly ever found a room that she could rent, so she always stood in front of the real estate agent with her arms crossed. She said, "Single women can not even apply for public housing unless they get married or have parents they live with. If you become 50 years old or over, you can apply for housing for elderly people, but most of the houses are located in remote areas and are old. I fully realized that women's wages are half that of men's, but rent is equal for men and women."





I heard that some companies fired single mother workers who have to take care of the elderly at home, and pregnant women after the earthquake. While the economic depression continues, many companies fired their employees at the opportunity of the earthquake. Some of them hired part-time workers after firing full-time workers. The weak are the first to be fired. I felt that women are always used as a convenient control valve depending on economic conditions.

Life Without Privacy in Shelters and Women's Loss of Health

Continuous living in shelters damages the health and violates the human rights of people residing there. In March 1995, I visited Itayado elementary school in Suma district. When I opened the door of the building to enter from its playground, I found people sleeping on futons laid at my feet. They were hardly able to maintain any privacy, having only cardboard partitions surrounding their futon. Is this really happening in Japan, which became economic super power? Although it has been three months since the earthquake, the government left victims on concrete floors. Some people still had to sleep in the crowds of people in gymnasiums. Even after more than a year had passed after the earthquake, some people had to stay from various reasons and to stay in very poor conditions called "waiting" places. The number of such people was 97 at 5 waiting places in total, and 261 people were living in tents in 18 areas (August 1996).

As to the health of the earthquake victims, the questionnaire survey of the Victims' Network conducted in December 1995 showed that women's health especially was deteriorating. The reason seemed to be that the burden imposed on women who took charge of household chores and taking care of children and other family members was too

heavy, while they continued living in the poor conditions of the shelters.

In addition, it was psychologically tough for young women to live in shelters without privacy. At a gathering of "WOMEN'S NET KOBE" in May 1995, a woman in her 20s who had been taking an active role as a volunteer burst out crying. She herself was a victim of the earthquake, and she was living in a classroom of an elementary school, sharing it with others. She cried and said, "When I got back to my shelter at night, I feel quite annoyed in thinking that why do I have to share a room with men I don't even know." It might be true that some victims are helping each other like a family, as the mass media has portrayed, but her crying was also the other side of reality.

Lack of Care for Pregnant Women and Mothers with Babies

After the earthquake, many women who had babies or had to look after the elderly were left in afflicted areas, while their husbands moved to hotels that their companies rented out. Young mothers who were compelled to take all the responsibilities of their children and other family members often abused their children with the continuous earthquake aftershocks. When nursery centers were closed and if their parents were not available for childcare, the wives were always expected to take time off from their work. They told me that they were so anxious about aftershocks that they could not leave their children alone at home, even though their children were elementary school students. They also said that they wished their husbands had even one month of "disaster leave" so that they could have engaged in volunteer work in the community. These were the real voices of women.

While public health nurses went to support the elderly people in shelters, the



healthcare centers stopped their periodical health checks. Besides, lifelines (including gas, water, and electricity) were cut. Under such circumstances, pregnant women and women who have just given birth called us, crying due to extreme fatigue and anxiety.

One woman gave birth to a premature baby in shock due to the aftermath of the earthquake, however, a public health nurse, who was supposed to visit the baby, did not come to her house. Although she asked to be sent a public helper, she was turned down because helpers were available only for taking care of elderly people and not for children. I felt fury about how strict they were even in emergency situations, and I realized the fact, again, that women are always the ones who have to take care of others, but can never be the ones who are taken care of.

Increase of Domestic Violence

After the earthquake, WOMEN'S NET KOBE set up a hotline for women. The telephone consultation for women revealed the issue of "violence against women." For instance, there was one man who lost his house due to the earthquake and still had loan payments that he had to pay for many years to come. He started beating and kicking his wife, even in front of his three-year-old daughter.

Women were abused with various reasons, "because his client's office was destroyed and the business transaction became difficult," "because his school became a shelter and he was stressed out," etc. The number of women who called us continued to increase. One woman said, "Am I selfish that I am asking your advice for this kind of thing when everybody is suffering from hard times because of the earthquake?" I felt sad when I heard that.

There was a 19-year-old woman who was 8 months pregnant. She had to live with her in-laws because of the earthquake. Her

husband hit and kicked her, saying "I don't want a baby!" His family only said, "Do not make our son mad." She did not know what to do.

Some people, however, even criticized women, saying that domestic violence was partially women's fault because women did not understand their husbands' stressful lives. Although women also had so much stress from household chores and childcare in poor environments in the aftermath of the earthquake, victims of violence were overwhelmingly women.

While mass media at the time reported heartwarming stories in devastated areas everyday, they never reported violence against women at all. One time I asked a journalist, who is sensitive about human rights issues, to cover the situation that women were abused by their husbands. He told us that that kind of thing is nothing new and refused to cover it. I remembered that I was very disappointed.

The telephone counseling services of WOMEN'S NET KOBE currently provides a support line for victims of domestic violence. In 2004 only, we had nearly 600 cases for counseling and escorting services (to public services agencies, police, hospital, courts, housing, etc.). The reality of violence is fierce. It is now easy to imagine that men who behave violently to their wives over trifles in peacetime would become more violent under a lot of stress in the aftermath of the great earthquake. However, it is regrettable that we did not have the enough knowledge about domestic violence at that time, and we did not have information about it at the time even from abroad.

Women's Gathering, "Women Will Not Tolerate Sexual Violence" and Bashing after the Event

After the earthquake, the city of Kobe was really dark. However, people in Kobe



didn't complain and endured it. The foreign mass media even praised that people were patient and keeping order.

In July 1995, we held a small gathering named "We Do Not Tolerate Sexual Violence." We rented a room in front of Suma station and invited a female lawyer and a public-health nurse from a shelter. We had 15 participants.

At that time, I had heard some rumors of rape just after the earthquake. Then, four attempted rape cases really happened. I thought it was not just a rumor and organized the gathering.

In the meeting, participants shared various cases of sexual violence. Ms. H, who started the telephone counseling service after the earthquake, reported 37 rape cases. She reported that there were lots of women whose backpacks were grabbed and dragged into collapsed buildings or where some buildings were being taken down, and gang-raped on their way to workplaces or schools. There was also the deliberate and vicious crime where criminals took several young women to a mountain in a van by deceiving them that it was a tour to take a bath. A public health nurse reported that some children were sexually molested by being touched on their bodies or inside their underwear at shelters. The age range of the victims reported was from elementary school students to women in her 60s. No matter how bad their experiences were, victims just had to remain silent if they did not have a place to go.

We did not want to dismiss and forget about sexual violence after the earthquake. We wanted to share the sorrow and resentment of women survivors. We called for various women's groups in the Kansai area, and organized a gathering called "We Do not Tolerate Sexual Violence – Networking of Women's Thoughts between Kobe and Okinawa" in March 1996. Approximately 230 women attended the event from various places.

Following the event, nearly 100 participants had a demonstration and walked from Kobe station to Sannomiya station, chanting that, "Women do not keep silent!" and "No means No!" (It was probably the first all-women demonstration parade in Kobe.)

We had a much more challenging time after the event. We had to face extreme bashing after the meeting in March. At that time, mass media mostly reported heartwarming stories and encouraging news toward reconstruction. It circulated the image that people in devastated areas were all innocent and struggling hard with their hardship.

A female journalist (who introduced herself as a writer focusing on feminism and issues related to Okinawa) contacted me for interview about the event in March 1996, and I accepted her request. The interview became an article titled "How to make a rape myth in devastated areas," which reported that rape did not really happen, in the July issue of *Shokun*. (An article titled "Wartime 'comfort women' - I do not understand whom and for what we have to apologize!" was in the same issue of that magazine.)

In the article, the journalist wrote that Ms. H, who consulted for victims of sexual violence, made up all of the fake rape cases. She also depicted Ms. H as a childish untrustworthy person. I was depicted as a feminist who believes such a lie easily and makes use of it to expand my own activities. Ms. H and I were shocked badly and thought it was "violence by pen." We could not understand why we were attacked so severely just because we spoke out that "We do not tolerate sexual violence."

After that, Ms. Yoko Kurihara, a member of the "Group of women who do not tolerate sexual violence" wrote an article in the June issue of *Shukan Kinyobi* in 1997 that:

"...attacking people who broke silence and



spoke out for justice is a common maneuver of perpetrators; they criticize the credibility of the victims' accusation by demeaning the victims' personality, exposing private lives or sex relations of the victims, which have nothing to do with their suffering. They also say that they did not run away even though the situation allowed it... ..we would like to fight against people who don't want to believe that rapes did happen, and we would like to make sure that 'society that can affirm, accept and protect victims, [and can] build... solidarity between victims and witnesses (Trauma and Recovery, Judith Lewis Herman)."

In April 6, 1999, the article entitled "Rapes" written by Dr. Satoru Saito (psychiatrist) was published in the Mainichi newspaper. He wrote that:

"The number of rape cases that Hyogo police recorded in 1995 was 15 cases. It was less than that of previous year. This fact itself is worth noting, and it should be pointed out as due to the limitation of police. Speaking of sexual crime happened in Kobe after the earthquake, even I, living in Tokyo, had several women victims for consultation. The society tends not to look at rape cases and tries to deny it."

Integrating Women's Perspectives and Women's Participation in Post-disaster Reconstruction Efforts and Prevention

The official survey report, "A Post-Earthquake Community Needs Assessment for Santa Cruz County (Loma Prieta Earthquake of October 1989)" reports the effects of violence against women. The report showed that sexual assaults rose by 300%, sexual-abuse and rape survivors' trauma got severe and the need for help increased, applications for Protection Orders from victims of domestic violence kept increasing

right after the earthquake, and child abuse also increased. According to the report, a men's group taking the initiative to stop the violence, launched a campaign, "Call before You Hit." The campaign stressed the importance of publicizing ways to cope with the stress caused by the disaster, as well as the importance of clean water and extinguishments of gas burners. The report concluded that we should expect an increase in violence against women after big disasters and that some measures to prevent violence should be integrated in the programs for post-disaster relief and reconstruction. The report is highly praised by crisis-management authorities in the US and Canada.

At the "Beijing +10" conference held in New York at the beginning of 2005, women demanded relief policies for women in armed conflict or disasters as a newly emerging issue. In particular, they urged governments and international institutions to take measures to prevent sexual violence such as rapes or trafficking in devastated areas.

We are expecting to have other great earthquakes in various areas of Japan. I believe that we should have disaster prevention and reconstruction policies integrating women's human rights. Disaster prevention will start in our daily lives. Therefore, it is crucial to protect women's human rights in our daily life.

Women should be able to live safely regardless of their marital status and regardless of whether they have children or not. We would like to have a society where a single mother can raise her children by herself and an elderly woman can live in a safe place.

Disaster prevention policies should aim to create such a society. Not only integrating women into firefighters, but also each local government should promote women's participation in decision-making positions for crisis management and disaster prevention.

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