Experiences of Non-Japanese Women at the Great Hanshin Earthquake

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Introduction

Women experienced the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake differently than men. Although the disaster occurred during what we called the Women’s Era, and Japanese society was moving towards greater gender-equality under the Gender-Equal Society Law, the earthquake revealed that a strict gender-based division still remains in Japanese society and in the home. At the time of the earthquake and also today, many Filipino women are married to the eldest sons of farming families, as Japanese women seldom desire this role. These Filipinos and other non-Japanese women found themselves not only entangled in the discriminating Japanese system of gender, but also faced an added obstacle of unfair treatment due to their foreign origins during their recovery from the devastation of the earthquake.

When the Great Hanshin Earthquake occurred on January 17, 1995, Hyogo prefecture had 99,886 resident foreigners officially registered, accounting for 1.18% of its total population. The number of casualties of foreigners resulting from the earthquake in Hyogo totaled 174, or 3.19% of all casualties. These statistics show that foreigners suffered disproportionately more than the rest of the population.

At that time, I was running a women’s group called Asian Women’s Empowerment Project (AWEP) that supported Asian women immigrant workers who once lived in the city of Kobe in their efforts to acquire jobs upon returning to their home countries. When the Great Hanshin Earthquake occurred, I first secured myself and then proceeded to help my Filipino friends transport relief supplies from Osaka to a Filipino community in Kitanocho, a beautiful town where early foreign settlers used to live. Some of the Filipino women who live there, I soon found out, work as domestic workers for Western business people. I also met many Filipino women who married to Japanese men who oftentimes experience terrible isolation in their all-Japanese community.

Although I had been living in Kobe for many years, I did not even know that Filipino people lived practically as my neighbors, and I began to correspond regularly with them. The earthquake had revealed to me the reality of Japanese society; a small thing causing few problems for Japanese people sometimes becomes a major difficulty for non-Japanese residents. I also discovered after the disaster that a support group/ non-governmental
organization called “Network Foreigners’ Assistance KOBE” had already been founded in order to help foreigners overcome various difficulties. Our group, AWEP, similarly began to join the fight for foreigners’ rights, consulting and supporting non-Japanese women after the disaster.

1. A Help Call from a Filipino Woman

Ms. S, a Filipino Woman who still gives us a call once in a while, gave birth to her child in the same year as the Great Hanshin Earthquake. Eight months pregnant and living with her unemployed husband and mother-in-law, she already felt extremely scared and insecure. She had visited an obstetrician only once and had not even figured out at which hospital she could deliver her baby. When the earthquake hit, her husband and mother-in-law had left the house. Luckily Ms. S did not suffer any serve physical injuries and her house managed to survive the earthquake in decent shape, but the event left her stranded at home, where she had been left alone with little food and no water or electricity resulting from the earthquake.

She had not even contacted her husband when I met her immediately after the earthquake. Ms. S told me how her husband’s family had opposed their marriage and her pregnancy. Her mother-in-law had even made her stay inside their home during the day because she did not want their neighbors to know that her son had a non-Japanese wife.

Although she gave birth without returning to the home of her husband and mother-in-law, she later decided to try living with them again for the sake of her child. However, it eventually became too difficult for Ms. S to trust her husband and to live with his mother who gave her so many problems, so she finally decided to separate from him and raise her child by herself. She currently owns and manages a small bar. Ms. S’s story inspired me to start building a much-needed information-sharing network within the Filipino community.

The majority of Filipino women living in Japan hold the resident status of “spouse of Japanese national.” Their freedom to live in Japan rests entirely upon their marriage to Japanese men. Filipino women in this situation numbered over 40,000 in 1995.

Even though they may face harassment and abuse from their husbands or in-laws, divorcing their Japanese husbands would force these women to return to their home country. The Ministry of Justice only allows foreign women who have children with a Japanese father to acquire the status of “long-term resident.” The Ms. S mentioned above has a child, so after her divorce she could fortunately obtain a long-term resident status.

Another non-Japanese woman, Ms. D, was considering separation from her husband who treated her poorly, but hesitated because she did not have a child. The day of the earthquake, he had left their house early without telling her where he was going. After the earthquake struck and destroyed half of her house, she began to look for her husband desperately. I offered her my help by visiting a police office and her husband’s former workplace to search for him. Eventually, we found him living with some other woman. Afterward, since Ms. D could not get support from her husband to renew her spousal visa, our group represented her and managed to succeed in renewing her visa. Today, having divorced her ex-husband, she has remarried and lives with another Japanese man. However, she still suffers greatly from the stress of taking care of her in-laws.

2. People Outside of the Social System

The government categorizes
non-Japanese residents in Japan according to purpose of stay (resident status) and nationality. Resident status also plays a role in the damages foreigners suffer from natural disasters, as it directly affects their situation in the Japanese social system. The areas that incurred serious damage from the Great Hanshin Earthquake, for example, included communities of foreigners such as Koreans, Vietnamese, Brazilians, and international students. They all suffered to a much greater degree because of their exclusion from the government-organized recovery process. The Japanese social system only supports Japanese nationals. It excludes these “others.”

Catholic sisters from Osaka and other volunteers visited shelters in the wake of the earthquake to ensure the safety of non-Japanese people and to provide assistance. They also investigated problems experienced by foreigners. They found that some of these people could not receive relief money or sufficient medical services because they could not understand the government procedures or did not know how to apply for them. Others had difficulties with their IDs.

Undocumented foreigners or those visiting Japan for a short period of time could not even qualify for Japan’s public health insurance and had to finance their own medical services without any help at all from the government relief program. People such as a Korean woman visiting her fiancée (a student living in Japan) or Chinese and Peruvian undocumented immigrant workers could not receive any funds for recovery or any medical services whatsoever.

As the problem became more and more prevalent, our group, along with many others, submitted a petition to the Japanese Red Cross Society of Hyogo prefecture and to the Kobe city government urging them to provide public aid to non-Japanese people in need so that they could receive equal treatment after this disaster.

Non-governmental groups, however, did make the initial effort to aid foreigners in the recovery process. For example, the Takatori Catholic church in Nagata district (which itself sustained heavy damage) supported non-Japanese victims of the earthquake including Vietnamese and Koreans. They also proved crucial to information dissemination with their emergency FM radio broadcast.

Others founded the Earthquake Information Center for Foreigners in Osaka immediately after the earthquake, which provided multilingual services and information dissemination. However, the languages they offered did not include Thai or Tagalog, so many Thai and Filipino women were basically rendered invisible and remained helpless. Such women with entertainer visas might have returned to their countries (the number of Filipinos decreased by 10,000 after the year of the earthquake), but one cannot even imagine how they managed to survive the disaster.

As for our group’s work, upon publicizing that the Japanese government’s relief program excluded non-Japanese earthquake victims, we received more than 10 million-yen (about US$100,000) in donations. We used some of this amount to aid those who could not receive the public relief money due to their status and to help non-Japanese families who lost loved ones. We used the rest of the donated money to set up the Migrant Workers Trial Fund, a program that supports court cases dealing with human rights violations against foreigners living in Japan.

3. Natural Disaster Victims Relieve Law and Non-Japanese Women Victims of Disaster

Many of the victims of the Great Hanshin Earthquake could not restart their lives and experienced great financial difficulties after the disaster. “Damage certificates” issued by local governments
determined the extent of relief aid provided to the victims, but many did not receive the comprehensive public support necessary to reconstruct their lives. The victims were simply expected to rebuild their lives on their own.

The Japanese government must protect human dignity and the right to exist, a right guaranteed by the Constitution. The strong demands from the victims and their supporters voiced this sentiment, which led to the enactment of the Natural Disaster Victims Relief Law three years after the earthquake on May 22, 1998. This legislation, however, did not retroactively apply to the damages and victims of the Great Hanshin Earthquake. Instead, it offered additional resolutions stating that special administrative measures would take care of victims of that earthquake. Consequently, Hyogo prefecture set up the Victims Self-Support Aid initiative with the Great Hanshin Earthquake Reconstruction Foundation and delegated duties to local governments in areas affected by the earthquake.

After these initiatives began many problems such as delays and postponements of application periods occurred. Also, by that time the living conditions of the victims had changed. As a result, some of the victims had become unable to qualify for relief aid. In the case of Ms. D mentioned above, she became unable to receive relief aid because she had remarried. Government relief policies prove especially problematic for women because they do not provide relief aid to individual victims. Instead, the policies determine aid distribution by heads of households (i.e., breadwinners), and women seldom hold this position in Japan. These policies indeed result in hidden discrimination against women. One woman, for example, suffered injuries from the earthquake but could not receive relief aid because her husband (the head of her household) escaped unharmed. She later brought her case to court, which eventually led to some revisions of the qualifications for relief aid. Ms. D also fortunately became eligible to receive aid after these revisions.

4. Challenges for the Future

In 1995, the year of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, more foreigners were leaving Japan and returning to their countries than ever before. Now, however, the number of registered foreigners in Japan constantly increases. Also, more people obtain long-term or permanent resident visas instead of entertainer or spousal visas. More and more foreigners are maintaining stable lives in Japan. Foreigners with certain resident statuses even now qualify for partial benefits from the Japanese government, including many benefits of public social welfare.

However, the Japanese social welfare system still puts non-Japanese (who, by and large, already lead the most difficult lives in Japan) into problematic situations. For example, some non-Japanese women who once escaped from their abusive Japanese husbands find themselves forced to return to these men simply in order to survive in Japan. The policies and regulations of the Japanese government, which are fashioned primarily for native Japanese people, jeopardize the foreigner’s right to exist. The language barrier, which results in a lack of knowledge and information, acts as one of the biggest problems. For example, some foreigners could not understand the evacuation instructions during the Great Hanshin Earthquake and remained in their destroyed apartments. As time passed after the earthquake, these people who suffered from the language barrier became more and more isolated. I myself had to wonder how many of them actually obtained information about Hyogo prefecture’s Victims Self-Support Aid program. After the court case mentioned above, the
authorities finally began to provide multilingual instructions about the program, but too much time had passed since the disaster actually occurred.

More people now can submit applications for aid after natural disasters, but these newly included people only include those who have situations like Ms. D. Government relief policies still exclude many, many others. Non-Japanese people who hold different statuses constantly come to us at the AWEP for consultation. If they live here undocumented, it becomes a lengthy and difficult process to solve even basic problems such as their children's education, medical issues, unpaid wages, or general difficulties in their lives. Solutions to these problems oftentimes prove impossible to achieve. The beautiful slogan, “coexistence with diverse cultures,” does not apply to these people. We should not ignore those who experience constant exclusion from Japanese society.

In the wake of the disaster, people tended to emphasize and praise “family love.” However, women who were already overwhelmed with the excessive duties of being a mother or wife in Japan began to rethink their lives after their near-fatal experiences. Family court arbitrations and articles in newspapers from the areas affected by the earthquake illustrate that families and couples faced severe problems time the disaster. For many women, including non-Japanese women, the earthquake became a turning point in their lives, for recovery and for becoming independent.

Many of these women consulted us about their divorce issues. The number of our encounters with single mothers is also always increasing. These women we help can seldom find jobs to sustain financially independent lives. It has been 10 years since the Hanshin Great Earthquake. Since then, the Gender-Equal Society Law has been enacted. Hyogo prefecture and Kobe city passed the Ordinance for the Gender-Equal Society. Public women’s centers provide women’s life planning advice, career consultation, and legal support for women’s human rights. However, still no public program exists for non-Japanese women, and this remains one of our largest goals for the future. We continue to fight for the human rights and dignity of non-Japanese women in Japan.

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