Social Status of Zainichi Korean Women in Japan

Japan has about 800,000 Zainichi Koreans, or ethnic Korean residents. Most of these individuals are those who had no choice but to migrate to Japan from the then Japan-colonized Korean Peninsula and their descendants. About 500,000 of them are special permanent residents with “Kankoku-seki” or nationality of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and “Chosen-seki” the term used by the Japanese government to originally refer to residents in Japan from the Korean Peninsula. The other 300,000 are Korean Japanese who were naturalized after 1952 (Korean & Minority in Japan, “White paper on Human Rights of Zainichi Koreans,” 2004). Zainichi Korean women have endured hardships of ethnic discrimination and control by Japanese society, as well as the division of their mother country and their ethnic group. In addition to these adversities, they have also suffered extensive oppression as a result of patriarchal male dominance within their own families.

Japanese people persistently show disdain and prejudice towards Koreans. Violence and threats against students of Korean schools in Japan are never-ending. Japanese laws continue to discriminate against Zainichi Korean, based on their nationality; for instance, senior or disabled Korean residents are not eligible for public pensions, and Korean schools have a lower legal status compared to Japanese schools. Furthermore, since September 17, 2003, when the government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly known as North Korea, officially admitted that they had abducted Japanese citizens, human rights violation against “Chosen-seki” in Japan have escalated. The North Korean government’s missile launch and nuclear testing has also added fuel to the flames of North Korea-bashing.

The partition of the Korean Peninsula into South Korea and North Korea divided the sense of belonging or identity of Zainichi Koreans in Japan. For Koreans in Japan the alien resident registration says either “Chosen-seki” or “Kankoku-seki.” In addition, Zainichi Koreans have an option of becoming naturalized as Japanese citizens.

The divide is further complicated because being “Chosen-seki” does not necessarily mean that the individual supports North Korea as a country. The enforcement of the Alien Registration Order of 1947 automatically changed the registration of Zainichi Koreans from “Japanese” to “Chosen.” After the partition of the Korean Peninsula in 1948, the Japanese government allowed Zainichi Koreans to change their registration from “Chosen-seki” to “Kankoku-seki” if they wished. After the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea of 1965 which included the Agreement Concerning the Legal Status and Treatment of the People of the Republic of Korea Residing in Japan, those who switch to “Kankoku-seki” have been granted Special Permanent Resident Status. On the other hand, the Japanese government regarded “Chosen-seki” as a mere “symbol” that did not promise permanent residency. Therefore, the agreement accelerated switching to “Kankoku-seki” registration. However, some Zainichi Koreans chose to remain registered as “Chosen-seki” for various reasons, one being as a remembrance of the once unified mother
country. Thus, Zainichi Koreans have complex and divided identities and chose a different identity for different reasons.

The following are two articles Zainichi Korean women wrote on the social status of Zainichi Korean women in Japan, mainly about the oppression they face, including patriarchy and the above mentioned problems.

**Highlighting Multiple Discrimination: Survey Report by Zainichi Korean Women on Ourselves**

U-ja Yang

The General Recommendation 25 of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination says that we should alleviate multiple discrimination against women, who are experiencing far more difficulties in a country that connotes racial discrimination. Armed with this recommendation, five Zainichi Korean women started the Appro Survey Project in August 2003, as the first step forward to protest against the Japanese government that violates the human rights of Zainichi Koreans and to win human rights on our own. The project carried out a research study for ten months from July 2004, and finished a summary report of its results in July 2006.

1. What we want to accomplish with the Zainichi Korean survey project

The Appro Survey Project is based on the idea that we wanted to reveal the social conditions we are living under in Japan. Our daily life embeds and hides multiple discriminations against Zainichi Korean women, complexly intertwined with ethnic discrimination and gender discrimination. Many Zainichi Korean women had no choice but to overcome ethnic discrimination and gender discrimination on their own, while realizing how unjust and unfair their conditions are. Most women did not have proper social status due to their gender, while women were expected to work more than men in anti-ethnic discrimination movements in Japan and movements of democratization of the Korean Peninsula. Nothing in this power relationship has changed. Now we are saying ‘no’ to androcentrism in the Korean Peninsula, in the host (Japanese) society, and in our ethnic Korean community. We do not want to have imposed on us the role of a good daughter, a good daughter-in-law, or a good mother who supports and encourages our men and who gives up fighting against the host society, in our community. We want to create a society where men and women live together and share responsibility. Forty-two women shared this ambition of the original five women, and reached out to 818 respondents in our survey. The result bore the fruit of a Zainichi Korean women status survey report.
Social Status of Zainichi Korean Women in Japan

G1: Employment with Korean Name

- 34% Employed with Korean name
- 29% Want to be Employed with Korean name
- 14% Have not thought about it
- 11% Do not want to use Korean name
- 10% Do not use Korean name in workplace
- 8% Other
- 5% N.A.

G2: Experience Discrimination due to Your Nationality or Descent when Seeking a Job?

- 34% Got denied due to nationality or descent
- 29% Felt discriminate against
- 14% Did not experience discrimination in particular
- 13% Don’t know
- 11% Got denied when using Korean name
- 9% Other
- 5% N.A.

G3: Your Position in Your Workplace

- 31% Don’t know
- 27% Part-time worker
- 22% Temp worker/dispatched worker
- 17% Full-time employee
- 7% Company owner/senior executive
- 5% Family worker
- 3% Self-employed (including in agriculture)
2. Survey method

We mailed out questionnaires to Zainichi Korean women in the Kinki region and collected completed questionnaires. Of the 818 respondents, over seven tenths were “Kankoku-seki,” two tenths were “Chosen-seki,” and less than one tenth were Japanese nationals. The questionnaire included more than 150 questions such as employment, workplace, family life, education of their children, traditional rituals, and violence against women.

The survey allowed us to hear from women on untold issues such as domestic violence, gender roles in the housework and childcare, and preference of boys over girls. The responses to the questions on employment and workplace demonstrate that gender discrimination and ethnic discrimination are well hidden in the workplace and reveal that Zainichi Korean women are forced to be a part of the poor working population. The results of the survey shows that (1) Zainichi Korean women are socially marginalized in terms of income and working conditions, and further, that (2) employers still deny jobs to Zainichi Korean women due to their nationality or their use of their original Korean names. The result shows that only 88 respondents utilized maternity leave and 21 took childcare leave. The number of Zainichi Korean women who can have children with stable employment is fairly limited. We need to have policies that help Zainichi Korean women to be self-sufficient, and the policies have to tackle ethnic discrimination, gender discrimination, and multiple discrimination.

Conclusion

It appears there is no end in sight to the North Korea-bashing in Japan because Japanese society does not fully understand the difference in the relationship between the current political situation and the present treatment of Zainichi Koreans in Japan and pre World War II. Needless to say, Zainichi Korean women as well as Japanese people hope to see the problem of North Korea’s abduction of Japanese citizens solved.

Zainichi Korean women are fighting against ethnic discrimination, are fighting to survive, and fighting against imposed gender specific roles, in order to live in a society that denies their basic human rights. We have shouldered productive labor, raising children, and nursing elders. We have carried out and maintained ethnic traditions and cultures such as Chesa rituals and have preserved our community. We have sought to draw awareness to ethnic discrimination and give
hope to the next generation. Our roles have supported the base of the Zainichi Korean community and energized it. Our experiences not only empower Zainichi Korean society but also question the direction of Japan's postwar responsibility. Our experiences also indicate the direction the host (Japanese) society should go at a time when its socioeconomic disparities are widening.

If Japan wants to hold a respected role in the international community, it should face the reality of the Zainichi Korean women. Japan needs to conduct research together with Zainichi Korean women and fulfill the responsibility of reporting to the UN commission.

U-ja Yang, the Appro Women Survey Project Member

In the Course of Mounting Tension between North Korea and Japan: Difficulties for Zainichi Korean Women to Live in Japan

Jong-In Kim

The influences of “September 17th”

I, myself, have never felt any special disadvantages because of my “Chosen-seki” in Japan. This is because the problem of having “Kankoku-seki” or “Chosen- seki” is essentially the same in Japan. These days, however, the image of South Korea is getting better because Korean dramas and actors have become popular in Japan. On the other hand, North Korea-bashing is growing and problems are arising for people who are “Chosen-seki” and live in Japan. For example, they cannot rent a house to live in or are discriminated against when looking for a job.

The other day I helped a woman who is a survivor of Domestic Violence (DV) to find a house to rent. However, she was refused a house when the landlord asked her if she was a North Korean or South Korean and she answered she was North Korean. It is hard for single mothers to rent a room and being “Chosen-seki” makes it even more difficult. Some landlords post posters saying “No North Koreans. No blacks. No dogs.”

Some people, who want to keep their ethnicity under these circumstances, are compelled to convert to South Korean citizenship to protect their rights in Japan. However, a vast majority of people, who do not wish to convert, have no choice but to be naturalized in Japan. I, myself, am often told by my relatives who became naturalized citizens of Japan, “You cannot live unless naturalized in Japan.” However, even if I were naturalized in Japan, would that really make our lives better when political situations
between North Korea and Japan are not improving? After all, the only place we can rely on is our Korean community.

**Hope is hard to find**

With the way that traditional Japanese society exists rapidly changing, *Zainichi* Koreans as well as Japanese naturally feel a vague anxiety about the future. However, most of the *Zainichi* Koreans are in a different situation from the Japanese, because they have unstable life security. Only a handful of *Zainichi* Koreans can work for big companies and receive a corporate pension. So far, Korean brothers and sisters who have financial capability have managed to help people who do not have enough money. However, now people have their hands full with their own lives due to the recent tense relations between North Korea and Japan, in addition to North Korea — bashing. Consequently, people, who have no family business to inherit, face insecurity and feel that they cannot even continue to live in Japan.

The situation for *Zainichi* Koreans in Japan is steadily deteriorating. Compared with the situation of 50 years ago, the current conditions have improved after the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, and the Alien Registration Law were amended, resulting in more stable legal status than that in other foreign countries. Also, the quality of life has relatively improved and blatant discrimination has disappeared. High quality education is also now available. However, even though they experienced various kinds of repression in the 1960s and 1970s, *Zainichi* Koreans kept their relationship with their homeland and had hope that the Korean peninsula would be unified someday. However, the current severe situation of the continuing hostile relations makes it very hard for *Zainichi* Koreans to find hope. I do not think that the moves toward concord and unification will rewind, but that does not mean that the lives of *Zainichi* Koreans will get better. Unless the relations between North Korea and Japan improve and a true reconciliation comes true, we will continue to live under these harsh conditions.

*Zainichi* Koreans have felt that “We are at the mercy of politics.” However, now many of these people feel more and more that they cannot continue living in Japan in circumstances where their houses are literally intruded upon with shoes on. Although my children are studying about their ethnic group, protected by their school and adults around them, I feel uneasy about what we can pass on to our children. This is especially the case for Korean children going to Japanese schools and it must be difficult for these children to develop their self-esteem.

Since I am in a position to defend the rights of my Korean brothers and sisters, I have to do my best to protect their lives in these severe situations. What can be done for *Zainichi* Koreans so that they can live in Japan while cultivating their ethnicity? Many *Zainichi* Koreans get married to Japanese and almost all of their children obtain Japanese citizenship. Ageing and declining birthrates are advancing in Korean communities. There are some concerns that there might be no *Zainichi* Koreans over time if this continues.

**To lead safe lives as *Zainichi* Koreans**

Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th in 2001, Japan has accelerated its preparations for war, dragged by the United States. “September 11th” was an incident which provided the Japanese government with convenient excuses. In the last Diet session, the revised immigration regulations law was enacted, which make it mandatory for foreign residents 16 years and older in Japan to be fingerprinted. This issue is perceived as a problem only for foreigners, but in fact, it is a problem for Japanese too. I wonder if
Japanese people are aware of it. Few cautious voices have been raised against the situation where systems which have control over the whole of Japanese society, including Japanese people, are being put in place, while Japan demands control over foreigners coming into Japan after September 11th.

While these trends continue, we, Zainichi Koreans, tend to become atrophied. But we feel happy when some Japanese people call to us, saying “Are you all right?” We also appreciate Japanese people who have organized groups to protect Korean schools in various regions. If Japanese people do not accept our existence in the community, it is difficult for us to assure the safety of Korean children living in Japan. To protect our children, Korean schools need to make an effort to root themselves in the community.

Now I am organizing a group called “Chame (sisters)” to address the issues of DV, from which Zainichi Korean women are suffering. This group is a place for Zainichi Korean women to gather and also a place for Japanese people to support us. As I was working to support the lives of Zainichi Koreans, I came to realize that DV is a huge problem. When people consider “protecting the lives and rights of Zainichi Koreans,” a lot of focus tends to be placed on the elimination of legal and institutional discrimination. Problems of individuals, especially of women, children, and elderly people rarely come to the surface, and are therefore constantly overlooked. While we need to unite all together to tackle the issues, problems we have to overcome by ourselves are often not recognized by others, such as perspectives of the weak within our Korean society and cultural succession of Confucian male chauvinism.

Behind the DV issues is the problem of patriarchy in the Korean community. We do not have adequate capacity to tackle the problems by ourselves. Besides, the Korean community in Japan is so small that it is hard to protect anonymity. In that sense, we cannot solve the problems without cooperation from Japanese people. In fact, many Japanese women are willing to strive to cooperate with us and we receive a lot of wisdom from them.

I am sure that we, Zainichi Koreans, and Japanese people will build a connection with each other, just like our group and Japanese women have came to understand and connect with each other, with the same theme of violence against women in mind, through the group of “Chame.” Although high political walls stand between Korea and Japan, there must be more similarities than differences between us. In addition, we have long been next-door neighbors living in the same community.

I think we have to set down firmer roots in the local community and step up efforts to understand each other. The human rights of Koreans and those of the Japanese are exactly the same issues; violation of human rights of any individual is a problem for the overall society, leading to a direct link to ourselves. I would like to have interest in each other and make an effort to build a society where both Koreans and Japanese can lead a safe life.

Jong-In Kim, Living and Legal Center for Korean Residents in Japan