The Mental Health Issues of Women and Children of Refugees in JAPAN.

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1. History of Refugee Acceptance in Japan.

The first refugees to arrive in Japan were nine Vietnamese who landed in Chiba Prefecture in May, 1975 after being rescued at sea by an American ship. Because the Japanese government at the time did not recognize the acceptance of refugees, they were allowed to land for a temporary stay. Later, as the so-called “boat people” began to arrive in greater numbers, the Japanese government created a special quota for acceptance and began accepting what it called the “Indochinese refugees” in July, 1979.

Although the initial acceptance quota had been limited to 500 people, the government gradually expanded this number under external pressure from the United Nations and other agencies. In 1994, it abandoned the quota, by then 10,000 people, and began accepting an unlimited number of refugees from Indochina. Furthermore, the Japanese government introduced a Refugee Recognition System in 1982, following its ratification of the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees .

After 1982, the number of asylum seekers arriving in Japan began to gradually increase from the world’s various conflict zones as well as from other regions chronically affected by political unrest, including in recent years countries such as Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the African states, notably Ethiopia. Their numbers have risen dramatically from 32 in 1990, to 1,388 in 2009, and then to 3,260 in 2013. Conversely, the number of asylum seekers certified as refugees in Japan is extremely low: 30 in 2009 and 6 in 2013. (Ministry of Justice, 2013)

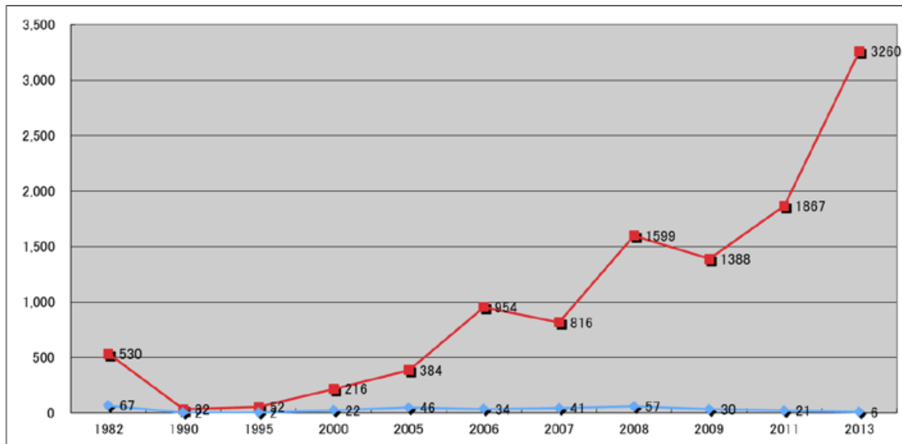

Figure 1. Number of Refugee Recognition Applicants

Additionally, from 2010 Japan began accepting refugees under what is known as a "third-country resettlement" program. Third-country resettlement entails the voluntary repatriation or relocation of refugees from temporary evacuation sites to permanent settlements in a third country where it will be possible for them to build a new life. Although acceptance was granted to refugees from Myanmar who had been staying at the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand before receiving resettlement assistance in Japan, the number of refugees seeking asylum in Japan has been low. Five families (27 people) arrived in 2010, and four families (18 people) in 2011, but there were no seekers at all in 2012(UNHCR, 2011). Conceivably, this context underlies the low level of interest in the refugee issue among the Japanese people, as well as the imposition of the problem on the Japanese government.

2. State of Refugee Support in Japan.

Determinations of refugee status in Japan take an average of a year and eight months. During the intervening period, support for asylum seekers is provided by the Refugee Assistance Headquarters (RHQ), an external agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, which provides four months of "public assistance expenses" (hogo-hi) as a general rule. This consists of a per diem living allowance of 1,500 yen and a monthly housing allowance of up to 40,000 yen. While applications for recognition of refugee

status is under review, applicants' lack of residence status means they are not permitted to apply for livelihood assistance or enroll in Japan's medical insurance programs. That said, receipts for necessary medical expenses will be reimbursed when brought to the RHQ. Nevertheless, because most asylum seekers are unable to pay for out-of-pocket costs, they are mostly unable to avail themselves of Japan's medical institutions.

Thus, asylum seekers end up focused solely on waiting for a decision on their applications for refugee status while bearing the double mental burden from the trauma they suffered in their home country and the harsh treatment they experience in Japan. As one person, whom I will call "A", and who is awaiting a decision on such an application, says, "I couldn't go to school or find employment in my home country, either, and it's the same now – nothing has changed. But I never would have thought that I would also be placed in a similar predicament in Japan. All I want is to live a normal life as a human being. I live day to day with my own encouragement."

3. Methods

I have been providing mental health assistance for Indochinese refugees since 2003, focusing in recent years on support for refugee mothers from Myanmar and their children. I organize a sushi-making event for refugee children several times a year and listen to what they have to say to us. I regularly hold group work sessions with refugee mothers where I discuss issues that they are facing as a community. Next, I would like to introduce some of the stories I have heard in these exchanges.

4. Mental Health Issues Face by Children Who Came to Japan as Refugees, and Children Born in Japan to Refugee Mothers

There have been numerous reports of the traumas faced by refugee children, including the difficulty they experience in building an ethnic identity and problem behaviors in refugee camps such as drug use and delinquency. Nevertheless, the support provided to refugee children in Japan is focused primarily on learning support, and does not extend to mental health assistance. This is despite the fact that they are "scarred" to a greater or lesser degree in the experiences they face in their school lives.

To begin with, it is said that all refugee children experience bullying, without exception.

They experience bullying during the early years of elementary school. One child, B, who was born in a refugee camp and arrived in Japan as an infant, says “I kept hearing, ‘you’re a foreigner, you’re a foreigner.’ But from my point of view, it’s the kids who say this that are foreigners. So, from our point of view it’s the Japanese who are foreigners.” Another child, C, who was born in Japan to refugee parents, says that “I used an alias when I was in nursery school, since I’d have been bullied if my name were different from the Japanese kids. After I got to elementary school, I could only use my real name, and I was laughed at when I introduced myself. I really hate my name.”

Another child, D, now an adolescent, says that “The bullying stopped when I got bigger. I worked as hard as I could to become Japanese from the time that I was little. I wasn’t able to feel good about myself the way I was.”

Next, there is the impact of statelessness on employment and educational advancement. Nationality laws in various countries are divided into two types: jus soli determines nationality by place of birth, as in the United States of America, whereas jus sanguinis determines nationality through the lineage of the parents, as in Japan. Therefore, children born to refugees in Japan cannot hold Japanese citizenship. Also, the Muslim Rohingya people, despite the fact that they live in the border region between Myanmar and Bangladesh, are unrecognized as a minority group by the Myanmar government. Therefore, they are stateless even prior to becoming refugees. And of course, their children are stateless too.

E, who was born in Japan to refugee parents, says that “If you don’t have a nationality, you can’t get a passport. Depending on your university, there are some places where you have to get overseas study experience. Since I can’t go abroad, I can’t go attend the university I want to go to. And I hear that there are companies that won’t hire people who can’t go on overseas business trips. In the future, what kind of work am I going to be doing? I can’t even have ambitions.”

Finally, there is the absence of any orientation toward understanding other cultures. F, who came to Japan in early childhood, says “The way knives are used in Japan is different from in Vietnam. A teacher at my school told me categorically ‘You’re doing it wrong – fix it!’ Teachers at the school told me to introduce Vietnamese culture and

talking about the áo dài folk costume and Vietnamese cuisine, but I wondered whether they actually had any interest in our culture.” Also, G, who came to Japan as an infant, remarks that “because I have to renew my residence status, I regularly have to absent myself from school to go to the immigration office. The teachers at the school ask me ‘is it really so important that you have to take time off school?’ It annoys me that people don’t understand the difficulties faced by foreigners.” These children say that they “can relax when playing with other children from the same country. Unlike at school, there’s the sense of safety that comes of being understood without having to go into unnecessary detail.”

From these anecdotes, it could be argued that low self-esteem, a sense of opacity about the future, and attitudes in Japanese society with regard to the acceptance of foreigners have the potential to evolve into mental health issues among children who came to Japan as refugees or who were born to refugee parents in Japan.

5. Mental Health Issues Face by Mothers Who Came to Japan as Refugees, and Refugees Who Became Mothers in Japan

With regard to refugee mothers, it has been reported that limited opportunities for participation in society have led to delays in the acquisition of language and cultural adaptation in the host country. In addition, there are reports on how the difficulty of building networks in the host country serves to exacerbate a sense of isolation, and how this complicates the experience of parenting in a foreign culture. In group work conducted with refugee mothers, women reported experiencing the following sorts of stress in their efforts to raise children in Japan.

To begin with, there is the fact that they are torn between the conflicting demands of two cultures. As related by one refugee mother from the Asian region:

Japan has many different rules when enrolling in elementary school. For example, parents and children have to wear the same sort of clothing for the school entrance ceremony, so for the ceremony each person would not be allowed to wear what he or she likes. As a parent, I’m not okay with that, but the children will be living their lives in Japanese society, so I don’t want to do anything that might embarrass them. I’m now going to be worried about whether there might be things that only I won’t know.

In addition, as another mother said, “There’s a saying, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.’ There’s nothing good about prioritizing your own native culture. But I’m not actually satisfied with this.” I found that refugee mothers are engaged in collecting information not only through participation in networks of their own compatriots but also through active exchanges with Japanese people so that their children do not fall into a position of disadvantage between their native culture and Japanese culture.

Next, there is the absence of any orientation in Japan toward understanding other cultures. Take for example the question of religious dietary restrictions. One refugee mother, a Muslim, says that “Halal foods are not provided in Japanese school lunches. My children take boxed lunches to school. In kindergarten, they had to take snacks.” In addition, “on one occasion when I went to a restaurant with the mother of my child’s friend, there was nothing I could eat. When I explained that there were certain foods I couldn’t eat because of my religion, she said it was ‘inconvenient’ (fujiyū) . I’d rather she didn’t use that word to dismiss our beliefs.” A refugee mother from the Asian region had to say that

My child attended elementary school in our home country up until the third grade. In Japan, he also transferred into the third grade. When he began attending school in Japan, he was frequently scolded. For example, there was one incident where he used some stationery belonging to the child in the next seat without saying anything. Even though he didn’t steal it – he was just going to use it and give it back. In our country, there is a philosophy of ‘common property’ – that’s why he used it without saying anything. But in Japan, you have to say ‘May I borrow this, please?’ Neither my child nor I, as parents, knew this. I feel sorry for a child to be scolded in such a blinkered fashion.

I found that refugee mothers feel more than a little frustrated at attitudes in Japanese school education toward understanding other cultures, and seek considerations so that their children do not fall into a position of disadvantage.

Finally, one thing that always comes up in group counseling sessions with refugee mothers is the difficulty of passing their native culture on to their children. As one says, “Children hate their own names. They hate being different from Japanese children. That said, my own child has stopped saying ‘I hate it’ through my repeatedly talking to

her about the origins of her name.” Also, “In our home country, it goes without saying that children do what they are told to by their parents or elders. But children raised in Japan grow spoiled and do things like talk back to their parents. On almost every single thing, I have to lecture them about why they should be obedient toward their parents and elders. And then I’m told by the children that ‘we’re Japanese – Japanese don’t do that sort of thing.’” From the group counseling sessions, it seemed that refugee mothers and children were involved in a test of endurance over how their native language, cuisine, and traditional customs could be passed on to the next generation.
One of the characteristics of the refugee mothers we provide assistance to is that they have established relationships of trust with both networks of their own compatriots as well as with their Japanese supporters. Although proficiency at learning Japanese varied by individual, they were able to express their own feelings with help from interpreters among their compatriots. However, I believe that with the continuation of this chronic strain, the stress these women are experiencing also has a potential to evolve into more serious mental health issues.

6. Support for Refugee Mothers and Children

To start with, in order to enhance resilience among refugee children, I might raise the two strategies of enhancing individual capacities and calibrating children’s surrounding environments.（Masten A.S, et al, 1990）These refugee children will be living in Japan from now on. In order for children under stress to not only adapt to life in a different culture but also achieve positive results after overcoming developmental challenges, it will be necessary to enhance the following capacities. The first is “the capacity to properly recognize and address situations” in connection with unexpected events. Then, there is the “trust capacity” of expressing personal feelings to parents and other particular adults in times of crisis. (Masten AS., Coatsworth JD, 1998) Furthermore, there are opportunities for gaining knowledge from older peers who already have experienced the process of adapting to a different culture. In other words, whether or not they are “mentally prepared” is also important. In addition, I believe the immediate presence of adults who care, and of adults who can create a safe and secure schooling environment, to be indispensable.

Next, in terms of support for refugee mothers, it appears necessary that persistent care and peer support is provided for these women. The feeling of being understood and of being appreciated for doing their best even though there are some things that don't go well are essential for preserving emotional well-being. I believe that for the host country to sustain an interest in these women will serve to promote their cultural adaptation and lead to the expansion of their networks in the host country. In future, I hope to focus my efforts on early detection and prevention support in the area of refugees' mental health.

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