

FEATURE *Women Struggling through the Triple Disasters*

Violence against Women in the Disaster Situation

Keiko Kondo

In response to the perceived needs of victims of sexual and domestic violence, the Cabinet Office provided a 24-hour toll-free telephone advice service from February 8th to March 27th in 2011 as a temporary pilot project. Members of cooperating groups, such as the National Women's Shelter Net, took telephone calls. More than 60,000 calls from throughout Japan were received. Many of the victims reported that they were grateful for the opportunity to finally be heard and wanted the Government to continue this service.

The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on March 11th, while this service was in operation. After the earthquake, the number of phone calls increased indicating the necessity of this kind of service more than ever. Many callers complained of unsettled sleep, and reported that the

lack of artificial light caused by the planned blackouts made their situations worse as vivid flashbacks of perpetrator's faces and disturbing memories made them fearful. They also said that it became difficult to go out for day time work. For example, one woman found it intolerable to live in the same evacuation shelter with her violent husband, but she had no other place to stay.

Evacuation shelters provided no support services for women and many victims of the disaster had lost not only their money but also their mobile phones. This left the hotline as the only way to report difficulties. The Government, however, refused our request to extend the duration of the pilot project. As a result, we were required to initiate a private sector project, beginning on April 10th, with volunteers from women's groups providing a free telephone advice service.

Between April 10th and May 18th, more than 20,000 phone calls were made to the service, but only 12.9% of these were answered. This was due to the fact that only two lines could be used as a result of the limited funding which was made available. It was later determined that 25 to 30% of the calls were from disaster-stricken areas. An example of the hardship this caused is evident in the case of one woman who had



Women-only space in a shelter in Fukushima

no choice but to evacuate to her ex-husband's old house with her children, as she was not able to stay in shelters. She had previously divorced him because of his abuse. She wanted to get away from his house, as it was extremely painful to stay there with him.

We are worried about whether violence against women would have been reported to the same extent and made public if people had been moved to apartment-style temporary housing rather than shelters, as they were following the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995.

In addition to the domestic violence cases, a number of calls seeking advice on children and their daily routines have also been received by the advice line. The number of these phone calls from affected areas has increased.

The cost to maintain one phone line is 1.5 million yen (USD18,500). The amount of money raised determined the number of phone calls we could answer. Subsidies have been sought as a means to expand and extend this project. The free 24-hour telephone advice service is absolutely essential for the victims of spousal violence and other sexual abuse. This basic level of support (telephone advice) must be extended to meet the next stage of need. It is clear that a long-term support system is warranted and that it would make a difference to the lives of women and children impacted by violence. A fiscal and pragmatic role sharing arrangement is needed. This would include a partnership between the private sector, responsible for daily operations, and the Japanese government assuming financial support.

A few critics have claimed that sexual violence against women in the di-

saster-hit areas is being over emphasized. However, a more accurate concern is that there are severely limited numbers of female staff in disaster counter-measure offices, both in central and local governments. If more female staff members had been in decision-making positions in these offices, adequate preventative measures would have been initiated. Instead, private organizations proclaim the message "take care of yourself."

In Japanese society, there still exists longstanding structural sex discrimination. Only a small number of victims file abuse reports with law enforcement or social agencies. In truth, there are millions of victims. This hidden issue becomes sharply visible during times of natural disaster. It is time to help women, realizing that it is extremely difficult for victimized women to speak for themselves. This issue cannot be taken seriously enough. It happens to many, many women.

Some unselfish group members who live in the disaster areas have restarted their support activities, even while they themselves suffer great hardship. This has motivated other women throughout the country to work together by, for instance, sheltering domestic violence victims and thereby allowing them to escape from their abusive relationships. Others must also understand this situation and participate in some way.

People often use phrases, such as "This is a national crisis" or "*Ganbaro Nippon* (Go for it Japan, or Keep up the good fight, Japan)." These phrases are reminiscent of the misguided national mobilization during World War Two, and it is as if they are saying that women and children should be quiet "for the good of the nation."

Hidden social structures become visible in difficult times. This is an opportunity to review real problems in our society, while providing seamless support to women who need to rebuild their daily lives.

Women's groups are developing a new paradigm. Women who actually face difficulties are beginning to demonstrate leadership for others. This will ultimately have a great impact on other support activities. The National Government should consider this potential in its recovery plans, and should include more women who have experienced hardship in its policy-making

mechanisms. In this way, the recovery process will be more effective.

There are still a number of women who cannot come forward. As an alternative, women who are close to them need to become spokespeople. Only then, will the National Government change its policy-making process and its policies.

Keiko KONDO: the National Women's Shelter Net

Translated by Akemi MARUMO
(Based on interview in May 2011)

Disproportionate Impacts on Female Workers

Midori Ito

The economic impact in disaster-hit areas is just beginning to emerge. However, as Action Center for Working Women already show, the most affected are part-time workers, the majority of whom are women.

For instance, a part-time kindergarten teacher, who worked six days a week for the previous four years at a public day-care center in Fukushima, was told after the disaster to temporarily stand by at home. Eventually, she was notified that the working schedule of all part-time and casual workers would be reduced to one day

would not be renewed unless workers agreed to these terms.

Similar cases have been reported outside the disaster-hit areas; some employees were told to stand by at home and eventually were laid-off while others lost their jobs as their companies relocated to Kansai areas or overseas. Many part-time workers were not entitled to receive their salary even if they were forced to take a day off or could not get to work on time due to the natural disasters or the government ordered black-out. A female part-time worker who worked

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