

## AJWRC Statement: Scrap the “Public Assistance Act” Amendment that Deteriorates Women’s Human Rights

On May 24, a woman from Osaka City found dead with her child, apparently from starvation. They are believed to have lived in isolation to avoid domestic violence. In Japan there have been numerous cases, like the case above, that should never happen. That Osaka woman visited the local welfare office for help by a legitimate right, but she was unable to receive financial assistance guaranteed by Public Assistance Act. She just wanted to find ways and means to live with her child, freed from domestic violence, but was shut off her way of living.

In the Diet, the “Public Assistance Act” amendment bill cleared the Upper House after not being discussed fully. With acute grief and anger, we raise a strong protest against it and call on the Japanese Government to stop lowering livelihood assistance benefits and scrap the proposed amendment bill before full enactment. The amendment bill would significantly devalue the current level, and keep needy people away from welfare benefits. It is true that even if Japan’s current welfare system is not functional, it still is an instrument to protect the lives of

citizens as a last resort.

Substantial economic disparity between men and women in Japan has not been reduced despite the repeated recommendations and warnings from international organizations. Women are at higher risk of falling into poverty owing to this economic gap. 70 percent of non-regular employment population who work in an unstable condition and at low pay is women. The average wage of women is about 70 percent of men’s. And the average annual wage is little better than 50 percent. Stereotyped perception for gender roles, such as “the primary wage-earners are men and women are to be fed by men,” served to make poverty risk of women look like a non-serious issue.

However, in the real situation the relative poverty rate for unmarried women who are not dependent of men is high. It is especially high for single mothers, and 57 percent of them live in poor economic situations. Women are more likely to have no sufficient lifetime earnings. As a result they have neither enough savings nor pension. 52 percent of elderly single women live in poverty.

There still are many women who face gender-based violence, as they remain vulnerable in the labor market and at home. The number of consultations received at the "Spousal Violence Counseling and Support Center," which provides advice for violence victims from their spouses and partners, reached into about 80,000 in 2011.

The number of sexual harassment cases in 2011 was

approximately 12,000. But we suppose that there were more women who were unable to raise their sexual harassment complaint as they worked in unstable, vulnerable conditions. Financial assistance from the government has been one of the main support systems for women in a vulnerable position to rebuild their lives with dignity and freedom, because they are unable to earn enough money from work, because they

### **Mother and Son Starved to Death in Osaka**

On May 24, 2013, a 28-year-old mother and her 3-year old son were found dead in their apartment in Kita-ku, Osaka. There was hardly any food or money in the apartment, and electricity and gas supplies had been stopped. There appeared to be attempts of suicide, along with a memo, which read: "I am sorry that I was not able to feed you more for this last time." Both mother and son are believed to have died from starvation.

In October 2012, the woman moved from her previous residence in Moriguchi City, Osaka, without telling her husband and worked in a restaurant in Kitashinchi area of Kita-ku until the end of the year. She did not give her address to her husband. It is reported that she was physically abused by him.

In July 2012, before her move, she visited the welfare protection service unit in Moriguchi City. She sought a consultation saying "my livelihood will be unstable from now on. What should I do when I am jobless?" However, the welfare officer told her to come back only after she could not find a job, and the woman did not come back for further consultation.

While the full details of the deaths are uncertain, this tragedy clearly demonstrates how dysfunctional the social welfare system has become in Japan. This is not the first time that a person struggling to make ends meet died without receiving their rightful welfare benefits. With lack of supporting measures for victims of domestic violence and the prevalence of gender discrimination in the labor market, Japanese women are exposed to higher risks of poverty than men.

Translated by Song-Yi Baek

are affected mentally and physically by repeated violence and almost lose social relationships.

However, even in this situation, there are number of people who have not been informed one's entitlement to the government financial assistance. There are also people who hesitate to use the aid because of having a stigma attached to the aid, or people who are prevented from applying for the aid at the counter of welfare office.

There are a number of controversial points in the amendment bill. The most worrisome point is that welfare offices have been stressing referral of qualified dependent. This makes victimized women too nervous to apply, as it stirs up their fear of being discovered by their abusive spouses. There is no end to the number of murdered stalking victims. Their fears are not their imaginary worlds.

No sign of eliminating wage differences by sex has been seen. The support programs for female domestic violence victims and their children remain incomplete. On the other hand, the government authorities not only intentionally put stigma and fear into welfare recipients, but also try to lower financial assistance benefits. We are severely concerned that many women who feel marginalized by economic difficulties and violence lose hope to survive.

These policies may inflict cruel

damage, almost equal to violence, on women. Making this financial aid system worse may strengthen the cycle of poverty further. And it would obstruct the implementation of a child poverty prevention bill (now also in discussion in the Diet) which comes together with financial assistance amendment bill.

The public assistance is one of the indispensable support systems for women to realize basic human rights, as they are jeopardized the "right to life" by gender-based discrimination and violence. We have seen too many victims, such as the mother and child from Osaka. It is obvious that what Japanese Government should do now is to revise the amendment bill more accessible for people in need.

Therefore, we urge the Japanese Government to stop lowering the assistance level, and to withdraw their proposal which aims to deter one's access to entitlement.

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Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center

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