

Are Older Japanese Women Better Off?

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

Tatsuko Isekawa looks forward to her afternoons. From 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., she may be found playing board games with her friends Yasuko and Keiko at the Plus-shikoen Centre for older people in Kyoto. Tatsuko is 65 years old, not very old by Japanese standards—the average life span for women is 84 years (and 77 for men)—but she opted to stay at the Plus-shikoen because she does not have any company at home.

Today, the biggest percentage of older people's population in the world is found in Japan, where they make up 17 percent of the total population. This figure is expected to reach 25 percent by 2015.

In Japan, women are known to outlive the men by about seven years, a trend which has been observed in the country since the early twentieth century. In Kyoto prefecture alone, women account for over 90 percent of residents of the three facilities for older people. All 50 residents of Plus-shikoen, one of the three, are women.

Statistics released by the government in September of this year show that there are 10,870 centenarian Japanese women as against 2,158 men. Government reports also indicate that the number of centenarians this year is 1,690 more than in the previous year.

As for those in their seventies, a study revealed that women again outnumbered men. In the 75 years and older bracket, there are 5.76 million women and 3.11 million men.

An official of Japan's Health and Welfare Ministry noted in a report by Inter Press

Service (IPS): "Japanese women have been outliving men since the early 20th century when women, in general, lived two years longer than men. But the last 30 years witnessed a more dramatic growth in the disparity between the sexes with women living 6.8 years longer."

Some of the reasons that have been cited to support this trend include women's hormonal balance being more suited to longevity, as well as the relative lack of stress in women's lifestyles. The same IPS report quoted Ikuko Sakamichi, manager of Tatsukeai Ota Hasesanzo, a non-profit organisation that services older Japanese. Sakamichi supports the second argument: "Elderly women have lived at home most of their lives taking care of their families while their husbands were the breadwinners. This allowed them to take care of their health and make friends with the community, a much more healthy lifestyle compared to the high-stress lives of their husbands who worked from morning till night."

However, Japanese feminist activists are challenging this theory. They contend that because of the traditional low regard given to

women by Japanese society, life has always been difficult for them whether at present or in the past. Moreover, in the recent decades more and more women have been taking up careers outside the home while carrying out the same domestic responsibilities.

Services and Facilities

Sakamichi's group (Tatsukeai Ota Hasesanzo) is among the services and facilities for older people that have become increasingly available in Japan. The idea of leaving ageing parents to institutional care used to be unimaginable and unacceptable. However, as the country became heavily industrialised, most adult Japanese have joined the labour force. This has led to the breakdown of the traditional extended family system, and the need arose for institutional support services for the elderly. The establishment of facilities for older people started in the early 1960s. Presently, 99 percent of Japan's bedridden older people are cared for in nursing homes.

Services in these institutions range from full time residency to short-stay service (one week, for example) to day service and home service.

The cost of access to institutional service in Japan has become more affordable in recent years. The Kaigo-hoken, the government insurance system for handicapped and older people, was implemented in April 2000. Under this scheme, the government shoulders 50 percent of the maintenance cost of facilities, while the other 50 percent come from employees' contributions. Every employee over 40 years old is required to make a contribution to the Kaigo-hoken, the amount computed according to one's salary.



Residents of Miyabinosono Nursing Home in Kyoto celebrating Natsumatsuri (summer festival).

There are six gradations of institutional care—0-5 depending on the needs of the resident. The fifth grade of care is considered special care. In this grade, the resident needs a wheelchair, feeding and toilet assistance. The total cost of special care is Y300,000 (US\$ 2,700) per month. Of this, the resident's family shoulders Y25,000 (US\$ 225) and the balance is covered by the Kaigo-hoken.

Day service which includes feeding, bathing and transportation service to and from the client's house costs Y4,200 (US\$38) per day.

Three facilities in Kyoto are operated by the Fujinokai Social Welfare, Inc., a non-profit organisation responding to the needs of older persons. Residents may engage in music therapy, arts and crafts workshops and sports activities such as bowling and volleyball. Holidays and festivals are likewise celebrated in the retirement facilities—something that residents look forward to as these are occasions for family visits.

courtesy of T. Saguchi



In the company of each other, older Japanese women savouring the pleasure derived from a good read.

Continuing Concern

The already large population of older people in Japan will certainly increase in the coming years. More and more women prefer to stay single and choose not to raise families, according to Takashi Sakaoka, director of the Miyabinosono Centre for the Ageing in Kyoto. Currently, the average number of children per woman is 1.35. To keep the demographics at the present level, however, the average number of children should be 2.1 per woman.

There are also reports that the Japanese government is considering relaxing immigration policies to bring in more migrant workers to provide care to the country's growing population of older people.

Compared to the 90 percent of the world's working-age population who have no assured retirement income, older Japanese appear to be better off. However, the same IPS article reports that some older women

remain unhappy as they still are confined to their homes or in institutions. Ironically, at a period in their lives when they are finally free to start thinking about themselves, "many of them do not have the courage to break out of social traditions."

Is the problem then, just about the needs of ageing women, or is it about the status of women throughout their whole life cycle? ♪

Mavic Cabrera-Balleza is the Communications Programme Manager of Isis International-Manila. During a trip to Japan in August 2000, she stayed at the Plus-shikoen Centre for Older Persons in Kyoto and met their residents and staff.

References:

- Interview with Takashi Sakaoka, 10 August 2000
- IPS-Elderly Women Seek, Find Social Support by Suvendrini Kakuchi