

- 1 Japanese Women in a "Super-Aging" Society
- 2 Kazumi Hayase
- 3 Nagoya Women's Studies Group
- 4 2-91 Nagara-cho, Nakagawa-ku, Nagoya City, Aichi, Japan, 454-0815
- 5 mizuka@mxw.mesh.ne.jp
- 6 Abstract of paper

Japanese Women in a "Super-Aging" Society

In this paper I aim to investigate the reasons why Japanese women seem unable to enjoy their old age, even though they are said to have the highest longevity in the world. The suicide rate of elderly women in Japan is high, and many visit temples to pray for sudden death. This paper will provide interviews with elderly women, their family members, doctors and medical staff who are taking care of them. I will discuss how patriarchy and capitalism have affected their quality of life by examining the way sexism and ageism have victimized them. By referring to new movements to solve the problems of the elderly and improve their lives, I will try to research the possibilities for elderly women to exploit their yet unseen golden years. I would also like to examine and compare the differences in the lifestyles of Japanese, American and Scandinavian women aged 40 and upward. By doing so I hope to discover possible solutions for future generations.

Japanese Women in a “Super-Aging” Society

Kazumi Hayase

In this paper I will examine problems related to aging that today's Japanese women face. I will discuss the causes of their problems, and then I will suggest some possible solutions.

Aging is a serious concern for modern women, because, on average, women live up to seven years longer than men¹, and more than ninety percent of the caretakers of the aged are women.² Japanese women had the greatest longevity in the world as of 2002—their life expectancy was 84.93 years.³ Moreover, the growth of the aging population in Japan is the most rapid in the world. Compared to other age brackets, the percentage of those aged 65 and over was 10.3% in 1985, and is estimated to reach 25.2% by 2015, and 27.4% by 2025.⁴ Japan took only 24 years—from 1970 to 1994—to double the ratio of its aging population from 7% to 14%.⁵ Without a doubt, the “super-aging” society is fast approaching us. It is an urgent necessity, therefore, for Japanese society to confront the problems of its rapidly aging population and to guarantee for its people—especially elder women—a bright future, particularly in their golden years.

The first problem we encounter is among elderly Japanese women, where we find the second highest suicide rate in the world⁶. The elderly who live with their families commit suicide about one point six times more often than the elderly who live alone.⁷

¹ Asahi Shinbun, August 1, 2002 'Sakunen no heikinjyumyo' (The average life expectancy last year).

² Ueno, Chizuko (1994) *Yonjyussai karano oino tanken gaku* (Exploratory study on aging from age 40) p.57, Sanseido: Tokyo.

³ Asahi Shinbun, *op.cit.* The life expectancy of Japanese men is 78.07 years.

⁴ Katei mondai joho senta (Family problems information center) (1998) *Rojin wo meguru kazoku mondai Q&A* (Family problems concerning the elderly: Q&A), Aiko Noda supervision, pp.223-24, Jiji tsushin-sha: Tokyo.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.223. Sweden took 84 years and England took 46 years to do the same, and it is speculated that in America it will take 69 years.

⁶ Ochiai, Emiko (1994) *Nijyuusseiki kazoku e* (Japanese family system in transition) p.214, Yuuikaku: Tokyo. The suicide rate of Japanese women over sixty-five years of age was 40.6 per 100,000 in 1988, while that of Hungarian women was 59.3.

⁷ Yamanoi, Kazunori (1991) *Sekai no koureisha fukushi* (Welfare for the world's elderly) p.11, Iwanami shoten: Tokyo.

It would appear that elderly Japanese women are not always happy in their extended families, even though many elderly who have lost their spouses live with their children and their grandchildren.⁸ Depression is the main trigger for suicide. Dr. Susumu Hamada, a psychiatrist, points out that many elderly women are suffering from depression, but the people around them tend not to help them to overcome their affliction, even though there are ways to treat them.⁹

The second problem is the large number of bedridden elderly. According to the Ministry of Labor and Welfare 1,243,000 people are bedridden, and about 62 percent of these are women.¹⁰ Mr. Kazunori Yamanoi, who visited facilities for the elderly in seven countries, stated surprisingly that he seldom saw bedridden elderly in Denmark and Sweden.¹¹ The situation in Japan being what it is, most Japanese find his observations hard to believe.

Abuse of the elderly is the third problem. A survey in 1999 showed that elderly women were abused twice as often as elderly men.¹² The older and frailer they become, the more often they are abused. Consequently, senile persons are the most at risk of being abused.¹³ In Japan there is no formative law prohibiting abuse of the elderly. Abuse in the elderly person's own home also occurs more often than at facilities for the elderly.¹⁴ Physical abuse is the most frequent in Japan, followed by neglect and mental abuse.¹⁵ In many facilities, elderly people are still physically restrained to prevent the messes caused by incontinence. Medication used to sedate them is also common.

These three problems are related, forcing elderly Japanese women to endure tragic circumstances.

But middle-aged women in Japan are suffering, too. As they are the main caretakers

⁸ Ochiai, *op.cit.*, p.214.

⁹ Hamada, Susumu (1990) *Oi wo ikiru imi* (The meaning of living life in old age) pp.140-41, Iwanami shoten: Tokyo.

¹⁰ Koseirodo-sho (Ministry of Labor and Welfare) (1998) 'Kokumin seikatsu kiso chosa' (The lifestyle of the people: a basic survey), p.59, in ALMANAC 2002 Medical Care & the Pharmaceutical industry, Fujisawa Pharmaceutical Company Limited: Osaka.

¹¹ Yamanoi, *op.cit.* p.63, p.85.

¹² Hisako Hashimoto (2002) *koureisha no jinken* (Human rights of the elderly) p.7.

Nakanishiya-shyppan: Kyoto.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8, p.12.

for their elderly, they are often accused of incompetence or even of maltreatment. On the contrary, though, they too are victims who have been driven into a tight corner. Many women are desperately struggling in a “care-giving hell”. Many elderly women in Japan actually visit temples to pray for sudden death. They fear becoming bedridden and dependant for all their personal needs. Recently, increasing numbers of middle-aged women also pay visits to those temples for themselves, as well as on behalf of those they care for.¹⁶ Japanese women cannot help but appeal to religion for mercy.

First and foremost, the Japanese government must bear responsibility for these problems. The government adopted the expedient policy of the so-called “Japanese-style Welfare” system, which compelled women at home to take care of the aged without any benefit of a social support system. Its aim was to save on the welfare budget for managing the increasing number of the elderly since the 1970’s. It also intended to keep economic growth stable after the oil crisis. The government and capitalists skillfully took advantage of the patriarchal norm, which was still prevalent in Japanese society, so as to attain high commercial productivity. Under the patriarchal norm, Japanese women—especially daughters-in-law—are expected to play the role of nurturer for the aged. The gender division of labor was thus established and there were no physically able men available at home to share the care-taking burden. As a result, only women suffered hard times, confronted by the grueling work of care giving, *sans* reward.

At the same time, Japanese housewives began to join the workforce as part-time workers. Many housewives with part-time jobs struggled with the dual burden. Without any social support, these women had to quit their jobs when their parents-in-law became invalid.

Both elderly women and their daughters-in-law are trapped and exploited by the capitalistic and patriarchal systems. Sometimes the media focuses excessively on the conflicts between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law. But what we really

¹⁶ As stated by the priest of *Kosho* Temple and the wife of the chief priest of *Kichiden* Temple on Apr./10/2003 at 11:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m., Japan time.

should be most concerned about is the system itself, which was politically concocted by capitalists and patriarchs.

The average monthly pension for elderly women is only 110,000 yen,¹⁷ as they were not able to work full time during their productive years. Today's elderly women were raised and influenced under the prewar family system, thus internalizing the "chauvinistic" ideology of their male counterparts. They have been mentally as well as financially dependant on men. They have been obedient to authority because power in Japan has belonged to men. Many doctors say women in their 70's and 80's are overly patient—they put up with physical pain and never complain about medical treatment. As they were not allowed to live their lives as individuals, they can hardly be expected to be satisfied with their lives in their later years. Unfortunately, they have lacked self-respect and self-reliance throughout their lives. Many elderly women have to accept the role of the sweet grandmother in order to survive. Medical staff often hear elderly women grumble about their daughters-in-law, saying that they are disobedient to them. These women lament that the sacrifices of their younger days have not been rewarded. Some elderly women focus their regrets and anger inward, toward themselves, and become depressed; this is another cause of suicide.

Also, middle-aged women who take care of their elderly are deprived of the right to live their own lives, pursuing their careers or their own goals. These middle-aged women were raised and educated after World War II and are more immune to the prewar family system. Their priority is their conjugal relationship. Moreover, they have more experience in the work market than previous generations. Although many women have given up their careers to take care of their elderly, they usually have no right to family assets because they are not blood-relatives. The daughters-in-law are expected to take care of the parents-in-law, but are not asked for advice. The parents-in-law trust only their own sons and daughters for that. It is understandable that they often consider the care giving system unfair and intolerable. Some daughters-in-law might even neglect or abuse their elderly parents because of

¹⁷ Asahi Shinbun, March 19, 2003 'Koreisha jisseikatu kanari kurushii' (Life for the elderly is pretty tough). The average monthly pension for men is nearly 200,000 yen.

this resentment. The majority of women taking care of the bedridden are in their late 50's.¹⁸ It is almost impossible for them to take care of the bedridden elderly alone. Taking care of the frail elderly is hard work. Caretakers need to change their clothes, bathe and feed them, and constantly move them to avoid bedsores. They cannot have time to themselves because they are at the beck and call of the infirm 24 hours a day. The caretakers themselves need help. There is no doubt that insufficient social services in Japan have resulted in a lot of elderly becoming bedridden.

Second, the lack of awareness on the part of the people is partly responsible for causing the problems of today's elderly. Japanese people, as a rule, accept their government's policies without question. They also believe the assertion of economic experts that, "an excessive welfare budget would ruin the country". Many people have internalized ageism, and discriminate against the elderly. They often regard aged people as useless and weak, with no abilities left to cultivate. They look down on the elderly and ignore their opinions. Japanese people have affirmed the government ideal of family members caring for the elderly—mainly wives and daughters-in-law. If the elderly live alone and die alone, people usually sympathize with them and criticize their family members. People seldom acknowledge the right of the elderly to self-reliance. They have harbored the illusion of family, namely, that the fortunate elderly should be taken care of by their family members. The people make no demands that their government offer better services for their elderly, and as a result there are a large number of bedridden people in Japan. Most people are too busy making a living in this highly competitive Japanese society. Moreover, the frail are usually confined within their homes or facilities for the elderly, owing to inadequate infrastructure for the disabled and to the bias of ageism that people have. Aging is still considered a kind of deviation in Japanese society. They just turn their eyes away from the problem right in front of them, fearing their own old age and saving money to secure it.

¹⁸ Yamanoi, *op.cit.* p.211.

Recently some positive changes have been taking place in Japan. I suppose Japan is in a stage of transition, both with respect to welfare policy as well as to the consciousness of the people toward the aged.

In the year 2000, the Nursing-care Insurance System was introduced, and the 'New Gold Plan' was drawn up to provide better social services for the elderly. As people paid their premiums, they began to realize that social services for the elderly were not merely a remedy but also a right which was their due to receive. As a result, the shortage of helpers and facilities rapidly became clear. Special nursing homes with 24-hour care, which charge around 60,000 yen per month, are extremely popular. This year, there are 230,000 people on the waiting list for accommodation in Japan, five times as many as before 2000.¹⁹ The helpers' status and wages are still low though. Government officials are groping for better ways to solve the shortage of helpers, because they understand that sufficient helpers are a key to promoting home-based services.

A ninety-one-year old doctor, Shigeaki Hinohara is an invaluable role model of the active elderly citizen. His book entitled "*Ikikata Jyozu*"²⁰ (Living the Good Life) is a bestseller. He advocates the so-called "movement of the new elderly", and encourages people over seventy-five years of age to take part in social activities. The "New Elderly Society" now boasts more than 2,400 members, half of whom are women. They also published a book in which the elderly talk about their hard experiences during WWII.²¹ They expect the younger generation to realize that war is cruel and inhumane.

Baby boomers, too, will certainly contribute to the renovation of the bleak image of old age. According to a survey conducted in 1998, Japanese senior citizens were becoming more active; an increasing number of older people—especially those in their fifties—have begun to challenge themselves to self-improvement through continuing higher education, or have become enthusiastically involved in trips abroad or in

¹⁹ Asahi Shinbun, February 5, 2003 '*Tokurou Talki sha wa 23 man nin*' (Two hundred thousand people are waiting for accommodation in special nursing homes).

²⁰ Shigeaki, Hinohara (2001) *Ikikata Jyozu* (Living the good life), Yurigu: Tokyo.

²¹ 2002 nen 'Shin Rojin No Kai' (2002 'the New Elderly Society') (2002) *Katari nokoshu senso taiken* (The experiences of war passed down by word of mouth), Shigeaki, Hinohara supervision, Kodan-sha; Tokyo.

sports.²² In 2025, a large number of baby boomer women will be in their 70's. They will be the pioneers who live even longer than the women before them.

Globalization has also helped to raise the awareness of Japanese people. In Scandinavian countries, the fact that elderly women in wheelchairs dress smartly with their nails polished is persuasive enough to renovate the gloomy image which most Japanese people have. People may recognize that there are diverse possibilities in old age when they realize that there are more than 30,000 elderly people over ninety years old who are still active in America.²³ Through the internet, books and overseas travel, a growing number of Japanese have begun to realize that Japanese society lags far behind the Scandinavian countries, America, and other advanced nations when it comes to individualism and human rights.

More than anything else, Japanese people must develop a new solidarity. A change in values from productivity to solidarity is essential. Aging is everybody's problem. If ageism can be overcome and the normalization of Japanese society realized, then people will begin to understand that the elderly are no different from them.

In order to achieve this goal, we need to strive for gender equality—which is the absolute key to changing society—because sexism and ageism have the same roots. To stand up to capitalism and patriarchy, the exploited need to stand together and cooperate. Forty years ago, even Denmark and Sweden faced the same situation as contemporary Japan²⁴: women were taking care of their elderly at home. They began to join the workforce, however, and demanded that their government's social support system take care of the elderly. Now more than 80 percent of women are working, and women enjoy almost the same rights as men.²⁵ They have achieved a high

²² "Trends in Japan, Ambitious Grandmas, Adventurous Grandpas" <<http://www.jin-japan.org/trends00/honbun/tj990326.html>> on Mar./25/2003 at 4:30p.m., Japan time.

²³ Murata, Hiroyuki (2001) "*Beikoku Shinia Bizinesu No Torendo* (Trends in senior business in America)", p.2. in Society of silver business promotion monthly lecture <<http://muratainc.com/>> on Aug/16/2002 at 6:30 p.m. Japan time.

²⁴ Matuoka, Yoko (2001) *Rojin homu wo koete* (Going beyond the nursing home), p.42. Kurietsu Kamogawa: Kyoto.

Biyneru, Tamiko (1998) *Suweden chokorei shakai e no kokoromi* (Sweden: its preparations for a super-aged society), p.60. Mineruva-shobo: Kyoto.

²⁵ Matuoka, *op.cit.*, p.36.

Biyneru, *op.cit.*, p.61.

quality of life for the elderly and stable economic growth at the same time.

Japanese women can learn from their persistent efforts. As representatives for elderly women, Japanese women must take up influential positions in government in order to improve social services for the elderly. Japan should also introduce practical laws to prohibit the abuse of the elderly, and the appointment of an ombudsman is recommended as well. If we can trust the government to use them carefully, we would not mind increased taxes for social services. We would consider that as an investment in a meaningful old age. If there is efficient and sufficient social help available, elderly people can continue to explore their potential up until the last moments of their lives. Their family members, too, freed from the total burden of caring for them, will be enabled to provide genuine affection. In Denmark, the goal of care is to sustain the mental and physical ability of the elderly for as long as possible.²⁶ Even with respect to the senile, caretakers help them to help themselves. The elderly themselves should be granted the right to decide their own future. If people are able to live independently, within a national consensus of help and support, their last days will brighten.

Japanese women, who will make up the majority of the elderly population in the future, must take the lead. Every elderly person has experience and great wisdom to pass onto future generations. I firmly believe that Japanese society will be improved in every way when each and every elderly person is shown the respect they deserve.

²⁶ Jarden, Mary E and Jarden, Ole Jens, "Social and health-care policy for the elderly in Denmark" <<http://www.globalaging.org/elderrights/world/donsocialhealthcare.htm>> on Mar./16/2003 at 10:15p.m., Japan time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Asahi Shinbun, August 1, 2002 'Sakunen no heikinjumyo' (Last year's average life expectancy). The life expectancy of Japanese men is 78.07 years.

Asahi Shinbun, February 5, 2003 'Tokurou Taiki sha wa 23 man nin' (Two hundred thousand people are waiting for accomodation in special nursing homes).

Asahi Shinbun, March 19, 2003 'Koreisha jisseikatu kanari kurushii' (Rather poor life of the elderly). The average pension for men is nearly 200,000 yen.

Biyaneru, Tamiko (1998) *Suweben chokoreishakai eno kokoromi* (Sweden confronts a super-aging society), p.60, p.61 Mineruva-shobo: Kyoto.

Fujita, Mariko (1999) *Amerikajin no rogo to ikigaikeisei* (American people in old age and the formation of life goals), Daigakukyoiku shuppan: Okayama.

Hamada, Susumu (1990) *Oi wo ikiru imi* (The meaning of life in old age) pp.140-41, Iwanami shoten: Tokyo.

Hisako, Hashimoto (2002) *koreisha no jinken* (Human rights of the elderly) p.7, p.8, p.9, p.12 Nakanishiya-shyppan: Kyoto.

Jarden, Mary E and Jarden, Ole Jens, Social and health-care policy for the elderly in Denmark <<http://www.globalaging.org/elderrights/world/donsocialhealthcare.htm>> on Mar./16/2003 at 10:15p.m., Japan time.

Katei mondai joho senta (Family problems information center) (1998) *Rojin wo meguru kazoku mondai Q&A* (Family problems concerning the elderly Q&A), Aiko Noda supervision, pp.223-24, Jiji tsushin-sha: Tokyo. Sweden took 84 years and England took 46 years to do the same, and it is speculated that in America it will take 69 years.

Koseirodo-sho (Ministry of Labor and Welfare) (1998) 'Kokumin seikatsu kiso chosa' (The fundamental survey of the people's life), p.59, in ALMANAC 2002 Medical Care & the Pharmaceutical industry, Fujisawa Pharmaceutical Company Limited: Osaka.

Matuoka, Yoko (2001) *Rojinho-mu wo koete* (Beyond nursing homes for the elderly), p.36, p.42, Kurieitsu Kamogawa: Kyoto.

Murata, Hiroyuki (2001) "Beikoku Shinia Bizinesu No Torendo (Trends in senior business in America)", p.2, in Society of silver business promotion monthly lecture <<http://muratainc.com/>> on Aug/16/2002 at 6:30 p.m. Japan time.

Nakajima, Tsuneo (2002) *Nijusseiki no koreisha fukushi* (Welfare for the elderly in the twenty-first century), Mineruva-shobo: Kyoto.

Ochiai, Emiko (1994) *Nijyuisseiki kazoku e* (Japanese family system in transition), p.214, Yuuikaku: Tokyo. The suicide rate of Japanese women over sixty-five years old was 40.6 per 100,000 in 1988; in Hungary, it was 59.3 in 1988.

Okamoto, Yuzo et al. (1999) *Fukushi wa to-shi dearu* (Welfare is Investment), Nihon Hyoron-sha: Tokyo.

Okuma, Kazuo (1996) *Anata no rogo no unmeiwa* (Your destiny in old age), Budo-sha: Tokyo.

Shigeaki, Hinohara (2001) *Ikikata Jyozu* (Living the good life), Yurigu: Tokyo.

Trends in Japan: Ambitious Grandmas, Adventurous Grandpas <<http://www.jinjapan.org/trends00/honbun/tj990326.html>> on Mar./25/2003 at 4:30p.m., Japan time.

Ueno, Chizuko (1994) *Yonjyussai karano oino tanken gaku* (Exploratory study on aging from 40 years old), p.57, Sanseido: Tokyo.

Yamanoi, Kazunori (1991) *Sekai no koureisha fukushi* (Welfare for the worlds elderly), p.11, p.63, p.85, p.211, Iwanami shoten: Tokyo.

Zaidan-hojin Nihon Tokei Kyokai (The Japanese Statistics Society (2001), *2002 Tokei de miru nihon* (2002 Japan observed through statistics), Somu-syo Tokei-kyoku (Statistics bureau of Ministry of General Affairs) supervision, Zaidan-hojin Nihon Tokei Kyokai; Tokyo.

2002 nen 'Shin Rojin No Kai' (2002 'the New Elderly Society') (2002) *Katari Nokoshu Senso Taiken* (The experiences of war passed down by word of month), Shigeaki, Hinohara supervision, Kodan-sha; Tokyo.