

The Matter of Domestic Violence in Japan
(Topic No. 5: Intimate Partner Violence in Japan)

23ISP262

Allison Contois

Gender and Society

Professor Aiba

Friday, January 26, 2024

Introduction

Across the world, women become victims of Intimate Partner Violence, and it is no different within Japan. According to the World Health Organization, Intimate Partner Violence (to be referred to as “IPV” from here on out) is defined as “behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours” (World Health Organization, 2021). Furthermore, the World Health Organization estimates that there is a 36% median prevalence of people who experience IPV within Japan (World Health Organization, 2021). People of any gender can be perpetrators of or victims of IPV. However, both presently and throughout history, the most well-known archetype of IPV is with a male perpetrator and a female victim. For example, according to a study by Naoko Maruyama, Shigeko Horiuchi, and Yaeko Kataoka, out of Japanese women over the age of 20 who have had a spouse, 25% had experienced some kind of IPV and 41.6% of said women did not reach out to anyone (Maruyama, N., Horiuchi, S. & Kataoka, Y., 2023). The phrasing “some kind of IPV” means that even within IPV, there are categories that violence can be separated into. An article by Takayo Sasaki and Masako Ishii-Kuntz separates IPV into nine categories. There’s physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, psychological violence, spiritual violence, cultural violence, verbal abuse, financial abuse, and neglect (Sasaki, T. & Ishii-Kuntz, M., 2016). While physical violence leaves evidence that is the easiest to see with the naked eye, the other forms leave wounds just as profound. Many victims of emotional or psychological abuse suffer from anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), increased risk of self-harm, and suicidal ideation. According to the World Health Organization, out of a sample size of 6,590, those who were victims of IPV were roughly seven times more likely to experience mental or neurological disorders (World Health Organization, 2021). Additionally, in a study conducted by Honda et al., it is stated that sexual IPV in particular is a huge contributor to mental health disorders in women (Honda et al., 2018). Honda goes on to state “The findings of the present research demonstrated that sexual violence, in the context of the intimate partner, is detrimental to women’s mental health and an important independent contributor to the severity of PTSD and dissociative experiences” (Honda et al., 2018). Whilst historically IPV was viewed as a private concern between couples, it leaves significant and long-lasting effects on a large percentage of the

population and must be taken seriously. Japan must take steps to recognize the dangers of IPV and work to improve the safety of women within the country.

Why do men commit IPV towards women in Japan

In Japan, IPV has been a historic constant. Women were viewed as property of their husband and expected to be completely subservient to him (Sasaki, T. & Ishii-Kuntz, M., 2016). If a woman did something her husband viewed as wrong, it was completely normalized and seen as justified for him to use violence against her (Sasaki, T. & Ishii-Kuntz M., 2016). While there has definitely been an increase in women's rights within Japan, it is important to know the history of misogyny within the country as it provides important context to modern-day IPV. Attitudes towards women have evolved from Meiji era "traditional roles" to modern day misogyny. Additionally, despite the fact that much has changed since feudal Japan, women still fall victim to IPV at alarmingly high rates. According to a report from the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, roughly one in four women in Japan have experienced IPV from a romantic partner (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2021). This number is staggeringly high and showcases just how desperately major changes are needed within Japan.

Men's willingness to abuse women is often rooted within their own misogyny. Misogyny is defined as "hatred or prejudice against women, typically exhibited by men" (Kendell E., 2024). However, this definition is slightly flawed. It is important to note that misogyny is not simply hatred for women. As explained by Bancroft, "While a small number of abusive men do hate women, the great majority exhibit a more subtle—though often quite pervasive—sense of superiority or contempt toward females, and some don't show any obvious signs of problems with women at all until they are in a serious relationship" (Bancroft, L. 2016). Bancroft also argues that beliefs, values, and habits are to blame for men's abusive behaviors. Due to this prevailing idea throughout history that women are weaker, inferior beings to men and are objects to be owned, violent men feel entitled to do as they please towards women. Abusive men will often push blame onto the victim, claiming if she had done something differently, he wouldn't have hurt her (Bancroft, L. 2016). Women are expected to never question or criticize their partners, never disagree, never assert themselves, and if she doesn't meet those expectations she is met with punishment her male partner has deemed "his right". Furthermore, abusive men will

often try to make excuses for their abusive behavior. When a woman asks her abusive partner why he behaves the way he does, he may give reasons such as “When I get angry, I just can’t control myself” (Bancroft, L. 2016). However, this statement simply isn’t true. In most cases, men who excuse abuse by saying they can’t control themselves would never “lose control” with their boss, or any man they view as an equal or superior (Bancroft, L. 2016). Especially within Japan, where social hierarchy is so ingrained into the workplace and everyday life, men would never speak rudely to a respected colleague. This points to the fact that there must be other reasons that men commit IPV against women, other than just the excuses provided by abusive men themselves.

How to eliminate IPV in Japan

While no one solution by itself can totally eradicate IPV, there are multiple different strategies that can be used to decrease the number of IPV cases. One of those strategies is ensuring there are concrete consequences for perpetrators. Often, incidents of IPV go unreported, and even those who are reported never get charged. This poses a major problem, as many men do not face serious consequences, such as jail time, for their abuse until after they have been convicted multiple times (Bancroft, L. 2016). This is a failing on the police system in Japan. A powerful example of this systematic weakness is the case of Shiori Ino.

Shiori Ino was a 21-year-old university student whose murder resulted in Japan’s implementation of the Anti-stalking Act (Beyer, V. L., 2018). According to the Council of Europe, Japan’s Anti-stalking act prohibits repeated and unwanted phone calls, fax messages for the purpose of “satisfying one’s affection, including romantic feelings, toward any person or fulfilling a grudge when the said affection is unrequited” (Council of Europe, 2023). After a prolonged period of stalking, Shiori Ino was murdered by a hitman hired by her ex-boyfriend, 26-year-old Kazuhito Komatsu (Beyer, V. L., 2018). After only dating for roughly a month, Komatsu began to give Ino luxurious gifts while simultaneously emotionally abusing her. Frightened by his behavior, Ino attempted to break up with Komatsu, but was met with threats of violence towards her and her family. He began to leave threatening voice messages on the Ino family’s telephone, and eventually even attempted to invade their home with his friends (Beyer, V. L., 2018). Despite the fact that Shiori Ino and her family brought multitudes of evidence to

the police, they were written off and told “they had no case”. Shiori Ino was even blamed, saying it was her fault for accepting Komatsu’s gifts. The police made no attempt to protect Ino, and eventually she was murdered (Beyer, V. L., 2018). Even after her death, the police did not recognize their mistakes and instead launched a victim-blaming slander campaign against her. The police, in an attempt to hide their own negligence, attempted to paint Ino as a promiscuous woman who engaged in prostitution and made a habit of accepting expensive gifts from men. The truth didn’t come out until a journalist named Kiyoshi Shimizu decided to do his own investigation into the case and uncovered the police’s neglectfulness (Beyer, V. L., 2018).

Despite the fact that Ino and her family repeatedly went to the police with evidence that Ino was being stalked and repeatedly asking for help, the police dismissed her again and again until her tragic death (Beyer, V. L., 2018). This case highlights one of the reasons why women who face abuse cannot easily go to the police. Even women who do all of the “right” things, who collect evidence of their abuse and bring said evidence to the police to show them they need help are not believed or are ignored. This can discourage women from going to the police, making them feel as if trying to report abuse is futile if police are unlikely to believe them regardless of the circumstances. Furthermore, Shiori Ino is far from the only woman who suffered this fate. In fact, the National Police Agency estimates that each year in Japan, approximately 50-80 women are murdered by spouses (National Police Agency, 2013). That is why it is so important for police to take women seriously, because the alternative for many women is death.

Many women are afraid to step forward due to the rampant stigma and taboo surrounding IPV. Women are led to believe that it is a personal failure, and that they must not be doing enough to prevent the violence from occurring. There’s often an opinion that IPV is a “personal matter” that shouldn’t be interfered with by people outside of the relationship. However, it’s this same attitude that allows so many women to continue to be victimized by violent men. In order for women to feel that they are not alone, and that what happened to them isn’t their fault, Japan needs to create an environment where women feel safe to share their experiences. One solution that has proven effective in increasing the number of women who come forward about domestic violence, as well as one that would help to improve police response to victims of IPV, is increasing the number of female police officers. In a study by Caroline Newman, she states that, “[T]here was a significant reduction in intimate partner homicides in districts with more female

officers” (Newman, C., 2022). According to the National Police Agency, out of 260,000 police officers in Japan as of 2020, only 26,700 were female (National Police Agency, 2020). If Japan were to increase the number of female police officers, it would greatly benefit women who are victims of IPV. Additionally, once a society gets to a point where women are able to tell their stories of IPV, it serves to educate others about the reality of abuse.

Unfortunately, men who already have deeply set misogynistic views might not be moved by women sharing stories of the IPV they have faced. Thus, simply raising awareness may not be enough, and it is important to combat misogyny through early childhood education. According to Sasaki and Ishii-Kuntz, research has shown there is great importance in “teach[ing] children about the problems of restraint and jealousy in the dating relationship” (Sasaki, T. & Ishii-Kuntz, M., 2016). This early education would help to extinguish misogyny before it becomes a fully developed prejudice.

Conclusion

Japan’s IPV epidemic is not just a problem to remain within families, it is a health concern on a national level. With one in four Japanese women who have had a romantic partner in their lifetimes being victims of IPV, it is clear that Japan needs to take action to protect its female population (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2021). Cases such as the murder of Shiori Ino serve as a stark reminder that things cannot remain as they are. If things do not change, more women will fall victim to domestic violence. Through methods such as implementing early childhood education, increasing the number of female police officers within the country, creating an environment where women feel safe to come forward with their experiences, and increasing consequences for perpetrators of abuse, Japan can work to decrease the number of IPV cases.

References

- Bancroft, L. (2003). Part 1: The Nature of Abusive Thinking. In *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. essay, Berkley Books.
- Beyer, V. L. (2018, December 21). *Ladies & the law: The murder that resulted in Japan's Anti-Stalking Act*. Savvy Tokyo. <https://savvytokyo.com/ladies-the-law-the-murder-that-resulted-in-japans-anti-stalking-act/>
- Council of Europe. (2023, April 24). Japan: Anti-stalking Act - Cyberviolence - www.coe.int. Cyberviolence. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cyberviolence/-/japan-anti-stalking-act>
- Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office. (2021). Report on the Survey of Partner Violence. https://www.gender.go.jp/policy/no_violence/e-vaw/chousa/pdf/r02danjokan-gaiyo.pdf
- Honda, T., Wynter, K., Yokota, J., Tran, T., Ujiie, Y., Niwa, M., Nakayama, M., Ito, F., Kim, Y., Fisher, J., & Kamo, T. (2018). Sexual Violence as a Key Contributor to Poor Mental Health Among Japanese Women Subjected to Intimate Partner Violence. *Journal of women's health* (2002), 27(5), 716–723. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2016.6276>
- Kendall, E. (2024, January 3). *misogyny*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/misogyny>
- Maruyama, N., Horiuchi, S. & Kataoka, Y. (2023). Prevalence and associated factors of intimate partner violence against pregnant women in urban areas of Japan: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health* **23**, 1168 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-16105-9>
- National Police Agency. (2013). THE WHITE PAPER on POLICE. 2013 Special feature II: Police activities and children, women and elderly. https://www.npa.go.jp/hakusyo/h25/english/WHITE_PAPER_2.pdf
- National Police Agency. (2020). *Police of Japan*. National Police Agency. https://www.npa.go.jp/english/Police_of_Japan/2020/poj2020_full.pdf

Newman, C. (2022, November 11). Study: Hiring female police officers helps women report violence, sexual assault. UVA Today. <https://news.virginia.edu/content/study-hiring-female-police-officers-helps-women-report-violence-sexual-assault>

World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence info – intimate partner violence*. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/violence-info/intimate-partner-violence/>

Sasaki, T. & Ishii-Kuntz, M. (2016). Intimate Partner Violence: Domestic Violence from Japanese perspectives. In F. Kumagai & M. Ishii-Kuntz (Eds.), *Family violence in Japan: A life course perspective* (p.79-101). Springer, Singapore