

Response to Domestic Violence During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Japan

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) incidents, triggered as a result of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) imposed lockdowns, are being increasingly reported worldwide. In April 2020, the Spousal Violence Counseling and Support Centers conducted 13,272 DV consultations, which was 1.3 times higher than the number in April 2019. The All Japan Women's Shelter Network, a group of private shelters, responded to the DV problems resulting from COVID-19 and submitted a petition to the Japanese government on March 30, 2020. This led to tremendous progress, including the opening of the public DV counseling offices for COVID-19 emergencies, DV Counseling Plus (expansion of services to include telephone, web-based, and social networking service-based counseling), the launch of counseling services for non-Japanese residents, protection of victims, additional support, alliance with private shelters, and individual receipts of \$926 Special Cash Payment. The requests were granted as quickly as 1 month after submission. For Japan, this was unprecedented. Until recently, money did not come from the government, so it was not possible to talk to victims over the phone and provide subsequent support. Owing to the new support system for DV, 4,400 survivors used DV Counseling Plus (special DV consultation telephone services specifically relating to COVID-19) from April 20 to May 20, 2020.

Keywords: COVID-19, DV, Japanese shelter

Introduction

CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19) has continued to spread worldwide. On April 16, 2020, a nationwide state of emergency was declared in Japan, calling on people to suspend their businesses, stay at home, and going out was prohibited until May 7, 2020 (Cabinet Office 2020a). The economy worsened, and unemployment and bankruptcies were reported. Furthermore, a spate of suicides due to financial difficulties as well as domestic violence (DV) incidents triggered by COVID-19 has been reported. The reason for this increase in DV incidents in Japan can be summarized as follows: men are expected to provide for their families, and in situations like the current pandemic, imposed measures can lead to a sense of inadequacy and loss of control, thereby provoking assertions of power through different manifestations, such as violence toward their partners, children, or others living in the household (UN Women 2020c).

Spousal Violence Counseling and Support Centers (SVCSCs) conducted 13,272 consultations for DV in April 2020—1.3 times greater than the number of consultations conducted the same month past year (Asahi Shimbun Digital 2020).

Aside from consultations at a SVCSC, DV Counseling Plus was set up on April 20. This service provides consultations 24/7 through phone, e-mail, and social networking services (SNSs). As a result, 4,400 DV consultations were conducted a month since its inception until May 19 (Asahi Shimbun Digital 2020).

The number of reported DV incidents has increased not only in Japan but also worldwide, such as in Italy, where city lockdowns due to COVID-19 necessitated mass recruitment of staff for emergency shelters, hotline tele-counseling services, and online counseling services (Mazza et al. 2020). Thus, the Italian government has allocated €15,000 (1.74 million yen) to each shelter, and €2,500 (0.29 million yen) to each violence counseling center as emergency support expenses (Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunita [Italian government], 2020). In New York City, DV hotlines reported a 30% increase in April 2020 due to COVID-19 compared with the same time last year (Viveiros and Bonomi 2020). The largest DV charity in the United Kingdom reported a single-day increase of 700% in DV-related calls after a government-imposed lockdown (Viveiros and Bonomi 2020). In Canada, reports of DV to helplines increased by 300% in the city of Vancouver since their imposed lockdown, whereas in the province of

Manitoba, shelters and helplines have experienced a decline in calls for shelter (UN Women 2020a). In this way, the needs of helplines had increased, but there were some places where shelters and helplines must close. Nevertheless, the Canadian government had announced CA\$50 million in aid to support shelters and for survivors of violence (UN Women 2020b). As a characteristic of COVID-19-related DV services, in France, Italy, Spain, and the United States, women can alert pharmacies about a DV situation with a coded message specifically created to facilitate police and other support (UN Women 2020b).

In this study, we describe how quickly the All Japan Women's Shelter Network, a group of Japanese private shelters, responded to the DV problems, which arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and submitted a petition to the Japanese government as well as how the government's response changed and how it promoted support for victims.

Shelters in Japan

In Japan, there are both private and public shelters—organizations that deal with DV. Public shelters are commonly called the SVCSCs. The history of private shelters dates back to the 1990s, when a small office provided refuge to a woman.

The SVCSCs are public facilities run by the Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office. These facilities provide the following three services: (1) counseling for victims, (2) medical or psychological instructions for victims to improve their physical and mental health, and (3) securing of safety and temporary protection for victims in emergency situations. The number of consultations conducted at the SVCSCs increased to 1.3 times the figure of last April due to the impact of COVID-19.

Private shelters also received calls from many victims as the voluntary ban on leaving home due to COVID-19 aggravated DV. The main complaints received from the victims were as follows: "My husband started working at home and my children's schools were closed. So, my husband was under a lot of stress, and he started being physically violent to me (All Japan Women's Shelter Network 2020)." The reason such situations occur could be due to stressful conditions, such as the COVID-19-related physical distancing protocols, which can exacerbate DV and sexual violence risk (Andrew 2020). As violence is rooted in discrimination and inequality, it is ultimately a product of power and control between men and women (UN Women 2020c).

In light of these situations, the All Japan Women's Shelter Network submitted its "Request for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Child Abuse under the Condition of Novel Coronavirus Countermeasures" to the prime minister on March 30, 2020 (All Japan Women's Shelter Network 2020). Since the emergency request changed the response of the government to the situation, impacting subsequent measures, we provide the full text of the request.

- (1) Please do not close the DV or child abuse consultation service even in an emergency situation. In the case of the introduction of SNS consultation, it should be conducted by staff with direct support experience and private shelters. Furthermore, please let people know that the consultation service is

available, and share information on the system to help people who come for evacuation so that they can get temporary protection immediately, no matter where they consult, to prevent life-threatening situations.

- (2) During the period of anticorona measures, the prefectural government should be able to automatically provide temporary protection when a victim flees to a city office or private shelter. Furthermore, when a private organization receives a request for temporary protection directly from a municipality, the national government should bear the costs, regardless of whether the organization is a temporary protection contractor. In addition, many prefectures set the temporary protection period at 2 weeks; however, please extend the period flexibly in consideration of the situation of coronavirus countermeasures.
- (3) There will be an increase in the number of single-parent households in economic deprivation. If temporary benefits are introduced as a remedy for low-income people, there is a risk that spouses and children who leave home because of DV without transferring their residency cards will not be able to receive such benefits. Essentially, it should be rolled out on an individual basis. However, even if the benefit is provided on a household basis, special measures should be taken to provide aid money, and so forth, even if the head of the household is not the head of the household indicated on the residence card, if at least one of the following conditions is met: those who have proof of DV consultation, a victim of a case in which a protection order under the anti-DV law has been issued, and those who have taken support measures such as restriction of access to the resident card.

Response of the Japanese Government

April 3, 2020

In response to the mentioned request (All Japan Women's Shelter Network 2020), the Japanese government issued a statement, "On proper support for DV victims in response to COVID-19 infections" (Cabinet Office 2020b) on April 3, 2020. The statement emphasized the need to continue providing telecounseling services through local counseling offices in each prefecture under circumstances where a voluntary ban on leaving home and business suspension is required to prevent worsening of DV incidents arising from concerns over everyday life and stresses brought about by COVID-19. The statement also requires to quickly ensure the safety of DV victims if they suddenly evacuate to a private shelter, without an SVCSC deciding whether the protection is needed. Previously in Japan, if a DV victim evacuated to a public shelter for help, temporary protection was granted only if the victim paid the actual accommodation cost (adults: \$14–23 per day, children: \$9 per day; Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office 2019). However, most women escape with nothing but the clothes on their back, with no penny in their pocket. For a private shelter to offer temporary protection for such mothers and children, the shelter had to contact a public SVCSC. This was because the SVCSCs could offer services for free, and the authorities wanted victims to use these services. If the

SVCSC was full, the protection service would be entrusted to a private shelter. If the SVCSCs consign the protection service to a private shelter, the SVCSCs must pay the cost of protection service consignment. These cost \$72 per day for private shelters, this revenue is used as a financial resource to maintain facilities.

The temporary protection service was being offered to DV victims in Japan under this system. During the COVID-19 outbreak, private shelters were allowed to immediately provide temporary protection services to evacuated victims without asking for the decision of the prefectural SVCSC. Owing to COVID-19 infections, DV victims have a difficult time just fleeing. Therefore, this is a smart policy in times of COVID-19. It is essential that services adapt during the COVID-19 crisis.

April 17, 2020

The minister of state for gender equality declared the allocation of \$1.4 million. The document, released on April 17, revealed concrete details for the expansion of DV support (Cabinet Office 2020c). In addition to “the DV Counseling Navi,” which was being offered regularly, extended services began to be offered since April 20, 2020, including 24/7 telephone correspondence (DV Counseling Plus, a 24/7 telephone correspondence program put in place in response to the COVID-19 outbreak), SNS-based counseling, e-mail counseling, web-based interviews, SNS-based counseling for non-Japanese residents (available in English, Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Portuguese, Spanish, Thai, and Vietnamese), additional support for DV victims using resources from private shelters, and temporary protection support at private shelters or hotels.

April 22, 2020

As an emergency financial measure against COVID-19, the Japanese government determined to grant \$926 to all its citizens (“the Special Cash Payment”). Since each household had to apply for the benefits according to the number of family members to receive the cash payments, an issue arose as to whether those who fled from their families due to DV or abuse could receive the \$926 that they were entitled to receive. Accordingly, on April 22, 2020, a document entitled, “Of administrative transactions associated with the Special Cash Payment for refugees who have escaped from their partners due to violence, and so forth” (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2020), was issued, which announced that DV victims can receive \$926 at their current shelter if they can present a document that confirms their identity, and the application can be reviewed so that the batterers would not receive double payments.

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the presence of shelters is important, and the alliance between the SVCSCs and private shelters is essential for the safe evacuation of DV victims.

The All Japan Women’s Shelter Network submitted its “Request for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Child Abuse under the Condition of Novel Coronavirus Countermeasures” (All Japan Women’s Shelter Network

2020) to the prime minister on March 30, 2020. This appears to have brought great progress in the prevention of DV and child abuse. By April 22, 2020, issues acknowledged included the following: opening of the public DV counseling offices for COVID-19 emergencies; expansion of services to include telephone, web-based, as well as SNS-based counseling; launching of counseling services for non-Japanese residents; protection of victims; additional support; alliance with private shelters; and individual receipts of \$926 Special Cash Payment. When society was exposed to the threat of COVID-19, requests were granted as quickly as 1 month after their submission. Japan has never experienced actions like this—such as this support from the governor—in the past. We must reach out to the authorities to keep these policies in force after the eradication of COVID-19.

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