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Completed the master's program in international studies at the Graduate School of International and Cultural Studies, Tsuda College and received her doctoral degree in sociology from France's L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in 1981. Has been a full-time lecturer and associate professor in the Faculty of International Studies, Meiji Gakuin University (1986–97); professor in the Department of Sociology,

Global research into the conditions and problems

The role of migrant care workers in an aging society

Japan is coming face to face with a variety of issues raised by the globalization of reproductive labor. Reproductive labor is defined as “labor, often unpaid, which relates to human reproduction and which in many societies is performed by family members, particularly women.” Housekeeping, child care, and senior care are all considered reproductive labor.

Now, as you know, with Japanese women having fewer children and people living longer than ever, the aging of the population has progressed further in Japan than anywhere else in the world. Japanese society isn't just aging, it's aged: at last count, the country had 29,330,000 citizens aged 65 or older. That's a full 23 percent of the total population, or more than one out of every five citizens. Faced with this reality, some people in Japan have been saying that we have no choice but to depend on migrant labor to care for our aged. This situation isn't unique to Japan. In countries all over the world the number of women migrants employed in domestic and caregiving jobs is on the rise. I'm currently carrying out research to shed more light on this situation.

In the context of a human lifetime, from birth and childhood to aging and death, the physical and emotional care one receives in one's later years plays an extremely important role. It's a very real issue that almost all of us will have to face. And yet it seems to me that, until fairly recently, neither the academic community nor society as a whole has paid much attention to the caregivers who provide that support. It's always been the job of the daughters-in-law or the daughter or the wife. Nowadays we sometimes hear of men playing a bigger role, but women have always shouldered most of the responsibility. Because people have taken caregiving for granted as a woman's duty, they're not accustomed to thinking of it as labor that should be recompensed.

The Long-term Care Insurance system that Japan instituted in April 2000 took a step in the direction of redefining domestic work as legitimate, outside labor.

But when it comes to bringing in migrant workers from abroad, there are plenty of issues that need addressing. And regardless of whether it's migrant workers or Japanese citizens doing the work, we need to raise the prestige of caregiving in our society and give it the status of “decent work.”

Women as Japan's first wave of migrant labor at the beginning of the 1980s

In the 1980s the influx of migrant labor from overseas emerged as a major trend in the industrial world. What distinguishes Japan from other countries is the fact that our influx of migrant labor was spearheaded by women.

At the beginning of the 1980s, most of the migrant workers coming into Japan were women from the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries, who were permitted to enter and work in Japan under “entertainment visas.” Later, an increasing number settled in Japan as the wives of Japanese citizens, first in rural areas and then in the cities. A little later male migrant workers began to proliferate at construction sites and on factory floors.

These women migrants from Southeast Asia were often spotlighted in media coverage in connection with illegal gang activity or public morals, but they were rarely discussed from the perspective of labor. In recent years, though, talk about bringing care workers in from overseas has had the unintended effect of highlighting some of the labor issues surrounding the migrant women who have already settled in Japan.

Toward a system that treats care workers as valued professionals

In recent years Japan has concluded economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with Indonesia (effective 2008) and the Philippines (effective 2009), under which nurses and care workers from those countries can enter Japan as candidates for national certification. Before that, EPAs focused on liberalizing trade in agricultural and manufactured goods; this was the first time we incorporated provisions to facilitate the

of migrant domestic and care workers

movement of people across borders. The problem is that reproductive labor takes place in the context of personal interaction, so you can't just lump this type of labor together with labor for manufacturing goods. Another problem is that the current system erects major obstacles to non-Japanese women hoping to find legitimate, regular employment here as care workers—for example, requiring them to pass the same national certification exam that Japanese candidates take.

Another point we need to keep in mind is that caregiving for the elderly has a much shorter history as a profession than nursing, and it has yet to secure the social status that it deserves.

As mentioned at the beginning, what we need to do is design systems that recognize the social value of senior care as labor and promote that recognition throughout society as a whole. To take an example, in France, labor unions and employer organizations conclude nationwide labor agreements profession by profession, and that includes domestic work and child care. The agreement specifies employment conditions, including vacations and social security benefits, and it applies to migrant workers as well as French citizens. Italy has a similar arrangement. These countries still have problems concerning immigrants who work on a part-time or contract basis, but I think most migrant workers would prefer to work in a country that at least establishes basic working conditions for their profession. If Japan is serious about bringing in workers from overseas, it has to look at things from the viewpoint of the workers, not just the employers.



Philippine domestic workers and their supporters at the Personal Services Fair in Paris (November 2010)

A multilingual research team exploring migration and gender in Europe

Right now I'm working with my colleagues in the Research Collective on International Migration and Gender [IMAGE] on a collaborative project supported by scientific research grants from France, Italy, and Germany. We've begun to understand how many women migrants from various regions—including the Philippines, Africa, and Eastern Europe—are flooding into the developed European countries to find work as domestic employees or care workers.

For now, we're focusing on Filipina workers in Europe, since so many of Japan's women migrant workers are from the Philippines. We've put together a multilingual research team that's conducting coordinated studies to determine the nature and conditions of their work in various locales and the extent to which their employment circumstances differ from those of immigrants from Africa or Eastern Europe. In this way we hope to unravel some of the questions surrounding one of the important issues confronting the world today: the globalization of reproductive labor.—*From an interview with Professor Ito*