

Age brings no respite from hard times for the 'lost generation'



This is poverty? “Mr. Kimura” earns ¥5.5 million a year. But he used to earn ¥6.5 million. Then came the 2008 “Lehman Shock.” The economy, shaky to begin with, buckled. Salaries were cut, bonuses pared. Kimura’s housing loan, arranged pre-Lehman, absorbs ¥170,000 a month. His two kids are in private schools.

What to do? Learn the ways of poverty in order not to sink into it. Instant-noodle lunches. No drinking, or at least less. Moonlighting.

Really? Moonlighting? Yes, several nights a week and all day Saturday, at part-time jobs for ¥1,000 an hour. Weekdays he gets 2-3 hours’ sleep a night. “I just hope my health holds out,” he sighs, “till the kids are grown.”

Poverty. It’s a relative term. As with age, you’re as poor as you feel. Affluence brings with it rising expectations. Failure to meet them feeds the psychology, if not the dire physical deprivation, of poverty. Japanese-style “poverty” would seem enviable indeed to the grimly underprivileged in less favored parts of the world. That’s scant consolation to Kimura.

His story is part of a feature by Spa! magazine on “Poverty after 40.” The “economic miracle” of “Japan Inc.” has been history for decades, the bubble that sustained it having burst in the early 1990s. Japan then slipped into what was called a “hiring ice age.” Strapped corporations slashed recruitment. Young people graduated from university into nothing, or very little more — part-time jobs, for instance, at low pay, with no job security and no future.

“Lost generation” became a catchphrase. It’s still with us, two or three (depending on how you count them) generations later. The government’s latest estimate (July-September 2013) shows 19.08 million part-time employees nationwide — a record, says Spa! — as against 33 million full-timers. The former figure has been rising sharply since 1992; the latter, dropping gradually since 2000.

Japan, the world's third-largest economy, is becoming a nation of chronic underemployment — in terms of pay, not workload, for most part-timers work the equivalent of full-time hours.

Why “after 40”? Because what was initially primarily a young people's problem has matured. Victims are now in their 40s. Kimura is 47. He notes (sardonically?) that “Abenomics,” the economic jump-start engineered by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, may be having an effect — his part-time wages have inched up; not his full-time salary, however.

“Mr. Yoshimoto” has an income of zero. He's 42 and a university graduate, and yet has had no contact with the outside world in 10 years. It's a pretty ugly world out there, to the sensitively tuned. Yoshimoto's first post-university job was with a so-called “black company,” one whose key to viability is the vicious exploitation of staff and clients alike. It was a health-food retailer, and Yoshimoto claims he was forced to work from 8 a.m. to sometimes as late as 3 a.m., essentially making fraudulent sales pitches to vulnerable old people. “When I quit,” he tells Spa!, “it felt like I was escaping.”

A second job followed that turned out little better, and then, his trust in his fellow man shattered, he decided he didn't want to work or “have anything do with people.” Fortunately he was married — to a woman who understood him. She sent him to a doctor, who diagnosed clinical depression. The couple gets by — barely — on the wife's earnings. “She says she's OK with that,” says Yoshimoto. Mornings, he does housework. Afternoons, he idly surfs the Net. “My dog is my only comfort.”

“I know,” he adds, “that I'm taking advantage of my wife's kindness. But the thought of going out, of meeting people's eyes, terrifies me.”

“Ms. Morita,” 43, is a nurse's aide. “You'd think nursing would be immune from job insecurity,” she says. The market for her skills in a rapidly aging society should be inexhaustible, and probably is, but she too landed in a black company — a black hospital, as it happens — which grants no bonuses, benefits or overtime pay. Her monthly take-home pay is ¥180,000. A diabetic, she requires occasional hospitalization, which costs money she doesn't have and reduces her earnings, since she gets no paid sick leave. “How will I pay my rent?” she wonders, being at this point pretty much down to the wire.

“Mr. Mizutani,” 44, had a full-time job but, like many others, lost it, post-bubble, due to corporate “restructuring,” a euphemism for the laying-off of “superfluous” workers. That was 10 years ago. “I was still in my 30s then” — and single besides — “and not too worried. I was overly optimistic, it seems.”

In 2006 he landed a full-time job. “Here, I thought, was a ray of hope.” But his mother was in the early stages of Alzheimer's and his father, who had been caring for her, died suddenly in 2007. Now she was Mizutani's responsibility. She wasn't ill enough for institutionalization to be covered by the family's nursing care insurance. A home helper assists for two hours at a time, but a full-time workload soon became impossible. So it was back to part-time, and an annual income of ¥2.5 million. “And what if I myself become ill?” he wonders. He has nightmares of dying alone. “I should have got married . . .”

That, says Spa!, is what life can be like for those who, for one reason or another, lose their grip on stable, secure, conventional middle-class life. You never think it'll happen to you — and then, suddenly, it does.