

MEDIA MIX

Questions over degree of child abuse remain in Japan

By PHILIP BRASOR

Last April, a 34-year-old woman and her 38-year-old live-in boyfriend were arrested for allegedly burying the corpse of the woman's 9-year-old daughter in a Nara graveyard. Osaka police believe that the child had been a victim of abuse at the hands of the boyfriend. School authorities had earlier suspected abuse and made their concern known to the mother. Neighbors told police that the girl was sometimes locked out on the balcony of the apartment.

The dramatic nature of the story guaranteed close coverage, and the general reaction was one of exhausted resignation. It seemed as if this sort of tragedy has been appearing in the news on a regular basis for as long as people could remember. Back in 2000, when the government reinforced laws to allow local authorities to take charge of children they suspected were victims of abuse and neglect, the sudden prominence of such cases in the news was seen as being a result of greater awareness. Child abuse has always been a problem, but now people recognized it for what it was and were acting on their concerns.

Ten years later, nothing seems to have changed, and many of the cases that make the news all have a disconcerting narrative sameness: Single mother moves in with new boyfriend who tends to resent her child's claim on the mother's attention; mother, desperate for attention herself, allows boyfriend to assume disciplinary responsibilities; the violence escalates; the child dies. And it's no coincidence that the principals involved are invariably poor. The story is almost trite.

Last week, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare released a report saying that child welfare counseling centers throughout the country handled a total of 42,662 abuse cases in 2008, or 2,023 more than they handled in 2007. The number has gone up every year since statistics were first collected in 1990. Again, officials point out that the numerical increase may have more to do with greater awareness of child abuse than with the incidence of actual abuse.

In that regard, it's important to break down the statistics further. The July 13 edition of the Chunichi Shimbun reported that Nagoya's Children's Welfare Bureau handled fewer abuse cases in 2008 than it handled in 2007, but that there was a 70 percent increase in the number of cases where authorities removed children from their homes. And in 66.4 percent of these cases the person who "perpetrated" the abuse or neglect was the mother. A recent white paper compiled by the welfare ministry also stated that mothers were the abusers in more than 60 percent of nationwide cases.

This aspect of the child abuse issue — that the mother is often the abuser — has been downplayed in the media, not so much because of how it contradicts an image of maternal love that dominates the popular imagination, but because abuse and neglect are not as narrowly defined as people think. The death of the girl in Osaka is easy to report because the story is easy to process — she was the victim of a needy mother and her ignorant, desperate boyfriend. In the vast majority of cases, the story isn't so simple.

Several weeks ago, TBS's "Hodo Tokushu Next" located a couple who were receiving counseling and persuaded them to set up cameras in the couple's apartment during the day, while the husband was at work and the wife was alone with their two children, aged 6 and 1. All day long, the mother repeatedly strikes and shoves the smaller child, usually when the child demands her attention. The violence is disturbing enough, but what's also unsettling is the tense atmosphere. The woman never talks to her baby, nor to her six-year-old, who always keeps his

distance, wary of his mother's mood swings. Ironically, the mother keeps a blog in which she often writes about her children in an idealized way that has nothing to do with reality.

As troubling as the sequence was, it represented a case that seemed headed for a positive resolution. The couple, after all, were receiving counseling. Another segment implied the limits of the authorities in abuse matters despite new laws that make it easier for them to intervene. In one child welfare office in the Kanto area, a staff of eight monitors 800 cases. One involved three young siblings who neighbors reported wander the area at night "looking cold" and "smelling bad." The counselors could never catch the parent at home, and end up taking the children into protective custody while they are at school.

And once the children are taken out of the bad environment, their situations don't necessarily improve. NHK's "A to Z" recently reported on a facility in Nagasaki where children who have been removed from their homes due to neglect or abuse are treated medically. Many of these children are violent themselves. Most suffer from insomnia. One 15-year-old girl had developed an attachment to one of the nurses, and when she thought the nurse was ignoring her she flew into a rage that required tranquilizers.

The people who work in the facility understand what they are up against. Their desire to "fix" the relationship between child and parent is both compassionate and practical, and in many cases the child does want to return home. One single mother agreed to be interviewed by NHK. Her child was removed from her care because it was believed her neglect had caused him to become violent and withdrawn. She says she has never abused her son and "can't understand why he was taken away."

As one psychologist, who himself was an abused child, told NHK, he has no doubt that there are more abused and neglected children in Japan than statistics indicate. People are becoming more aware of what

abuse and neglect entail and, more significantly, are finally realizing that these problems are a lot closer to their own lives than they previously imagined.

The Japan Times: Sunday, July 19, 2009
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