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ISSJ News

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Greetings from the Chairman of the Board

In May 2017, following the retirement of Mrs. Yaeko Otsuki from the ISSJ board, Mr. Satoshi Nagasaka took office as successor chairman.

As successor to Mrs. Otsuki, I have assumed the responsibilities as chairman of the ISSJ board. I believe that, to effectively carry out ISSJ's longstanding mission of serving various societal needs, it is necessary to develop a balanced strategy that builds on our core mission and services while simultaneously revamping the organization so as to keep up with the ever-changing social needs and human environment. I fully embrace this challenge. In that regard, I humbly ask for your continued support and guidance as you did during the tenure of my predecessor, Mrs. Otsuki.

What's New?

●Adoption

We recently received an inquiry from a child guidance center regarding the possibility of adoption for a primary-school-age boy named Makoto, who lives in a child care institution. His mother's whereabouts remain unknown since she gave birth to her son. Makoto was born with a mild health condition, but now that he is 7 years old, he does not have any problems in his daily life and is a physically active child although he has somewhat less physical strength compared to his peers.

When ISSJ proceeds with an adoption, our social worker first meets with the child in person and talks directly with the child, as well as the staff of the child care institution and the child guidance center. During these meetings, the social worker gathers information relating to how the child engages with other people and his/her surroundings. This helps us assess the state of development of the child, such as the ability to form relationships and emotional attachments, as well as the ability to trust people. It also allows us to learn directly from the child about his/her likes and dislikes as well the situation in school.

The ISSJ's social worker assigned to this case was introduced to Makoto as someone who is going to find a father and a mother for him. The first time the social worker arrived at the child care institution, Makoto was still at school and the staff of the institution told her how he had been practicing on his own how to talk to the social worker in preparation for the meeting. At the actual meeting, however, due to feeling exhausted after school and shy to speak with an unfamiliar person, Makoto could not bring himself to talk with the social worker. The child care institution staff then encouraged him to take a short nap. "Please look for a new mother for me," Makoto said to the social worker when he woke up from the nap.

ISSJ is now looking for adoptive parents who will be a suitable match for Makoto's sensitive disposition. (Yamaguchi)

●Adoption from Thailand

In the summer of 2015, a Japanese husband and his Thai wife living in the Kansai area contacted us regarding adoption of the wife's child. They had gotten married the previous year and established a life together in Japan, and wished for the Japanese husband to adopt the wife's 4-year-old child then living in Thailand with her grandparents. The husband told ISSJ that he was the one who proposed the idea of adoption because he felt that his wife's child should be part of his family.

One of the services ISSJ provides is relative adoption involving two countries, including children of foreign spouses or their siblings (nephews and nieces) and grandchildren. Even if adoption is completed in Japan, it is not automatically recognized in another country. When a foreign national woman marrying a Japanese man has a child in her home country, the Japanese man first has to adopt that child according to the laws of his wife's home country. Such adoption then becomes the basis for the application to a family

court in Japan to have the child legally become a member of his/her Japanese family.

In due course, our ISSJ social worker completed a home study for this couple's adoption through interviews and home visits, and sent the report to the Adoption Center authorized by the Thai government. Generally it takes about a half year for the Adoption Center to review our report and make a determination on the adoption application. In this case, there was no reply from the Thai Adoption Center for a long time. When we contacted the Center, we found out that while they had received our adoption application along with the home study report, the staff assigned to the case had not had time to review it. We were told about severe processing delays resulting from hundreds of international adoption applications received by the Center every year.

Even so, we kept following up with the Thai Adoption Center. Two years after the initial consultation, we finally received adoption approval from the Center in the summer of 2017. It was a joyous occasion for the couple who had waited for two years to be legally recognized as a family. (Enomoto)

●Parent-Child Visitation Assistance

At age 4, Child A returned to Japan with her mother from Country C. Her parents are currently going through divorce proceedings through a lawyer. An agreement regarding their divorce has been reached, and with ISSJ's assistance, A has been able to see her father for the first time in three years. While A appeared nervous at the first visitation, she has now had several contacts with her father, who travels from Country C to spend time with his daughter, such as going to a zoo together. ISSJ social worker observes the interaction between the two of them during these visits and provides interpretation. A has gradually begun to smile at the gentle voice of her father, even when the meeting time ends, she now says "I don't want to go home yet!" It is heartwarming to the ISSJ social worker to witness how A is starting to open her heart to her father as they eat *takoyaki* together and she presses her face up close against her father's cheek when her father hold her in his arms so that she can see animals at a zoo.

Primary school-aged A seems wary of how to tell her mother how she spends time with her father. She intuitively understands the difficulty in the situation between her parents which requires third party intervention, and we can feel her sadness when she says "I love my father and mother equally!" Even though creating new relationships is not easy for estranged parents or their children, A's laughter during the visitations with

her father serves as a great encouragement for us to continue our work in this area.
(Inoue)

●Refugee Support

At the end of 2016, a young man from the Middle East received refugee recognition in Japan. He was not permitted to work while his asylum application was under review, which meant that it was financially difficult for him to support himself during that time. Nonetheless he enrolled at an evening middle school and his joy of learning helped him survive this difficult period. Opportunities to learn was not available to him in his home country, and he had always aspired going to school.

Once he received refugee recognition, he was able to participate in a 6-month settlement support program run by Refugee Assistance Headquarters. Through this program, he studied Japanese and Japanese culture from morning till evening every day and then went to the middle school in the evening. "I am very busy and I am very happy!" he told us. To show his gratitude to ISSJ, he cooked some Middle Eastern food and brought it to our office. Although two years ago he could not communicate with us without an interpreter, he now has no problem doing so by himself in Japanese.

As a Muslim, he also told us about the challenges he experienced in Japan due to cultural differences during the month of Ramadan. For example, Eid al-Fitr (the first meal after the fasting, when people gather at mosques and share a big meal with everyone) is a major event of Ramadan, but it overlapped with his evening classes at middle school and he had to make a hard choice between going to the mosque or his classes. Also, because Muslims adhere to multiple prayers and meal times throughout the day, he explained how it was difficult to get enough sleep. Indeed we sometimes noticed how his eyes were red from lack of sleep when he dropped by our office for assistance. This is an illustration of some of the difficulties refugees face in acclimating to the Japanese system that vastly differ from their own customs and culture. Facing such challenges, he remained determined to succeed and actively built his own support network.

As such, even amid the hard times he has experienced, he has made many friends and other contacts who have come to support his dream of becoming a first-class chef. With support from many around him, he is now making progress towards his dream little by little. It may be a long road to become a first-class chef in Japan, but we hope that his optimistic disposition and drive will lead him to a bright future. (Kondo)

Minds of Parents and Their Children

ISSJ social worker told a story of a family to whom she provided assistance.

Amin, a Second-grade Junior High School-aged Boy

“I came to Japan two years ago with my mother and two younger sisters. My father came to Japan seven years ago and worked hard to save money so that he could bring us over to Japan. We lived with my aunt’s family while my father was in Japan. There were bombings near our house so that I was very scared every day. I was able to go to school for just one year but the school was shut down in the middle of my term. My youngest sister got injured in an accident so that she cannot walk well now. I was angry with my father at first because I could not understand why he went to Japan, leaving us behind but I was very happy to know that he made an arrangement for us to live together as a family in Japan.”

“I just stayed at home for a while when I first came to Japan. I was just happy to spend time together with my family so that we always went out together. My father at that time went to a city office several times. He was not good at Japanese and always irritating and spoke loudly with his friends on the phone and he was shouting at my mother.”

“Three months later after my arrival in Japan I started to go to junior high school and my younger sisters go to elementary school. My sisters used to cry at first because they could not eat lunch prepared by school or had to sit down in the classroom although they could not understand what are taught at the class, but now they speak Japanese better than I do. On the other hand, compared with my sisters I know more kanjis and get better test scores. I want to get better at Japanese and help my father. My future dream is to build a house for my family.”

Amin’s Father

“I wanted to bring my family to Japan but felt anxious because I didn’t want my wife and children to have difficulties that I experienced in Japan. I think the Japanese language is very difficult. Japanese people do not show their inner personal feelings so that I don’t understand what they have in mind. Most of my colleagues at workplace are foreigners and I don’t have much to talk to with them so that I don’t have any Japanese friend yet.”

“I could bring my family to Japan with the assistance of lawyers and various support groups. I needed money to bring them over to Japan. It’s hard to work, but I have no choice because I cannot afford to reduce my income. I was very happy when my family first came to Japan, but my children often got sick and I had to take them to the hospital so that I had to be absent from my work.”

“When I hear the story of my friends who were recognized as a refugee in Europe I compare my present living condition in Japan with theirs in Europe. Nevertheless, Japan is a safe and prosperous country so that I won’t go back to my home country where life is in danger. My children have no passport now but I don’t want them to have trouble in obtaining nationality and status of residence. I want them to get Japanese nationality eventually, and to go to high school and university and obtain a job they like.”

Amin’s Mother

“I feel happy to live with my family. I am busy working on cooking, washing, cleaning and looking after my children every day. I cannot understand what is written on the news from a school. I always buy same groceries at a same supermarket because I cannot read what is written on the labels of groceries. I feel anxious if anything should happen in my husband’s absence. I want to study Japanese and master driving. I want to work eventually. I sometimes feel like going back home because I have no one around me with whom I can talk to about what I have in mind but I can keep trying for my children. I don’t want my children to have a hard time so that I want them to study hard.”

(In this story, a pseudonym is used not to identify an individual.)

ISSJ has been providing consultations and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers since Indo-Chinese refugees came to Japan from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1970s. There are about 300 cases of consultations annually, most of them come from a single man of Middle East, South Asia, African countries, etc., but in recent years, the number of consultations from women and families has been increasing too. One of the consultations frequently asked is an education of a child from his/her parents. We continue to provide assistance to them while finding it difficult to understand the situation where a child is placed or what he/she feels. (Shigeto)

Multicultural Mental Health

Clinical psychologist · Masaki Fukushima

Transcultural Mental Health Research Institute · Mejiro SOLA Clinic

One of the challenges for refugees and asylum seekers in trying to make a new home in a foreign country relates to mental health difficulties resulting from differences in language and customs. For foreign families settling in Japan, often these difficulties become manifest at children's schools or parents' workplaces. Although it is tempting to simply view such difficulties as "their" problem, it is also an opportunity to ask ourselves what kind of society we would all like to live in.

Masaki Fukushima, a clinical psychologist at the Transcultural Mental Health Research Institute – Mejiro SOLA Clinic, who counsels foreigners living in Japan, gave advice on what we can do to support these foreigners.

In recent years, the number of foreigners coming to Japan has increased year-on-year. According to Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), the number of foreign visitors in 2015 reached a new record of 19.74 million, an increase of 47.1% from the previous year. Moreover with the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, the number of foreigners visiting Japan is likely to continue to rise. Along with the rise in the number of foreign tourists, there also has been an increase in the number of foreigners settling down in Japan. We can often hear foreign tourists remarking how Japan is superior to other countries in terms of convenience as well as public safety and security. However, these positive impressions formed after staying in Japan for a few days as a tourist often undergo substantial change after years of living in Japanese society.

Mental Health of Foreigners

In my position at the Mental Health Research Institute, I listen to myriad stories from many foreigners. When foreigners decide to settle down in Japan based on their ideal image of the country, some of them find it difficult to cope mentally with the harsh reality of actually living in Japanese society.

Tokyo is home to many multinational businesses with some large companies implementing policies to globalize their own working environment that correspond to the diversity of their workforce, such as designating English as their official

language internally. I nonetheless feel that even at the companies attempting to globalize their workplace, the situation is still difficult for many foreign workers. One of the problem has to do with "service overtime". Even today, there are people in Japan who commit suicide due to overwork. Recently, the cases of newly-hired employees getting called to work at midnight or made to participate in hosting company golf outings on weekends or national holidays have been drawing attention. While these instances are customary in Japan, such "service overtime" can become a basis for litigation in other countries. However in Japan, a foreign worker is not considered to be exempt from "service overtime".

"I am working every day from morning till night. Even on holidays, everyone still works so I feel I cannot take any days off either," someone who came to me for counseling told me. She also talked about seeing people develop depression from overwork and explained about the additional stress on foreign workers due to communication barriers. "When I have a question about work, everyone is too busy with their own workloads and even when they do answer, they speak too fast in Japanese for me to follow," she lamented. These negative emotions can often lead to more serious discontentment, and in some cases cause someone to quit their jobs after developing a sense of self-loathing. This illustrates how seemingly small problems in a workplace can snowball into bigger issues, often requiring psychiatric attention or counseling.

What We Can Do

In present-day Japan, I believe that there needs to be a serious attempt to address mental health issues of foreigners. Even now the differences in language and culture remain significant barriers for foreigners as they attempt to acclimate to living in Japanese society. Among Japanese people, the sentiment of "when in Rome, do as Romans do" exists which may be creating a difficult environment for foreigners to live in. So how should Japanese people regard and treat foreigners? A major shift in the perception of foreigners may be necessary in workplaces and educational institutions. In recent years in Japan, the availability of Halal food has increased and at universities a quarterly academic calendar (four-semester system) has been introduced, signaling Japanese society's willingness to be flexible to meet the needs of foreigners and their systems. I believe that these changes will help create a more welcoming environment for foreigners, which in turn will have a positive impact on their mental health. In addition to reaching out to foreigners based on the exchange

of language and culture, we need to think about the basic idea of "helping another person in times of trouble". I believe the common Japanese expression of "are you okay?" resonates with everyone regardless of race and age. If we Japanese acknowledge the hardship these foreigners face and help them connect with people and institutions that can help them adjust, it might help create a more enjoyable and harmonious living environment for both Japanese and foreigners. Should we not strive to create such a society?

Participation at a US Embassy-sponsored Seminar

- Support for cases of child-abduction and visitation with parents



This summer, the American Embassy hosted a seminar for practitioners involved in parent-child visitations, including social workers. Topics included the kind of support that social workers can and should provide to families where a child is abducted by one parent, and then reunited, and there also was a case-study presentation by Ms. Rene Holmes and Ms. Maureen Heads from the

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (a.k.a. NCMEC).

In addition to ISSJ social workers, seminar attendees included other practitioners who receive requests for consultation from families dealing with child abduction, such as lawyers, clinical psychologists, university faculty members, staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and child guidance centers. We learned that even after a child is reunited with his/her rightful family, their relationship cannot go back to the way it was before experiencing the trauma of abduction, which makes it all the more important to understand and provide the kind of support these families need.

Ideally, support for abducted children, their parents and siblings would be provided by an integrated team of experts. However, Japan currently lacks such integrated framework that can provide medium to long term support in an ongoing manner, resulting in families receiving assistance only on an "as needed" basis. Without

denying the reality of past abduction, it is necessary to consider devising a long-term plan that takes into account possible ways to allow the parent who unlawfully took the child have an ongoing role in the child's life.

We thus learned about the importance of an integrated consultation support system in order to effectively deal with the psychological impact of child abduction on both parents, those unlawfully taking the child and those whose child was so taken, as it relates to their feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, and mistrust so that their child's future is not devastated by the family conflict. (Ōba)