

Chapter 5

Women are Ageing

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By Yuko Nishiumi, 40s, Kawanishi

The earthquake tested us and made us think ageing was a sin. So the days passed. Some elderly perceive their lives and worry about their future. Their aged bodies in need of an extra care were exposed to icy winds. They became sick and are dying even after the freezing weather turned into sweltering heat. If these suicides and chronic illnesses were all a result of the earthquake, the children and grandchildren of the elderly should be ashamed of themselves that they couldn't prevent the deaths.

What's painful to understand is why ageing women took the brunt of the casualties. Having lived for 40 years, I think there is nothing more wonderful than women who have lived over 80. That, in and of itself, is beautiful. It couldn't have been easy to live as a woman. They were born around World War I. During their younger days, they experienced a war of aggression that could come to no good end; indeed, it brought only suffering. Many young wives lost their husbands to this war. They raised their children in the harshness of defeated post-war Japan. Even when they could relax and benefit from Japan's rapid economic growth, they were too old to enjoy any of it. If they had ever had their golden years, that would have been enough. I can't even imagine the kind of life they led, but it was a life they chose.

Would these women have wished to die underneath their collapsed post-war wooden houses and burn to death? Why did so many elderly women have to be sacrificed to these tragedies? They died as though they took responsibility of all the irrationality in the world. They can no longer speak, just as they couldn't when they were alive. But we, the women who survived, must listen to their unheard and unspoken voices. They are proclaiming our future – what should we do. We must pass this on.

Over half of the victims of the Great Hanshin Earthquake were over 60. Of the 5,470 corpses that were identified as of April 14, the elderly made up the bulk of the casualties. Men made up 40 percent with 2,192 and women 60 percent with 3,278. If we look at just age, people over 60 account for the greatest number of casualties at 20 percent, followed by people in their 70s and 80s, and people in their 50s, tallying in at more than 10 percent.

If we analyze the statistics in detail, breaking them down by age and sex, women in their 70s died most, followed by those in their 60s, 80s and 50s. Women took

the brunt of the casualties.

Kobe City Disaster headquarters has explained these statistics as follows: 1) younger people have moved to the suburbs; 2) the damaged area was occupied mostly by elderly people living alone; 3) most of the houses were built before or just after the war.

However, I feel that these statistics are encoded in the realities of society how, like a message written in hidden ink.

We create our own society

By Hitomi Tsujimoto, member of Hanshin Awaji rescue team Chibikuro

It's been almost a year since the earthquake. The media have stopped broadcasting earthquake related news. The town is slowly undergoing reconstruction. As the surroundings return to normal, I've begun to realize how hard it must be for the elderly and disabled who are left behind.

If young people move, they can make friends and quickly adjust to their new surroundings. If they get lost they can laugh and shrug it off. They can manage the fine print of the yellow pages. If elderly people get lost and want to return home, their feet and backs hurt. They can lose a whole day doing this. They can't read the yellow pages' small print to find a doctor or a grocery store even if they needed to. There is an old woman who has cut down on the liquid she drinks to avoid going to the toilet. Because there is a step up to the toilet in the temporary housing, she is afraid she might fall and not be able to get up by herself. Some old women brought so much luggage to the shelter you wanted to ask, "Where are you going to sleep with all the luggage?!" One the other hand, others lost all interest in material things after the quake, saying, "I don't need anything besides a futon," and they gave away all their valuables.

Involved with the elderly, I've learned that people's ways of thinking, their values and their pace are different among the age groups. Our social system is not designed to accommodate these differences. Everything is made convenient and easy to use. In dealing with troublesome business, we who create this society shift the responsibility. We create the system within the society according to our pace. Pretending not to see those who can't keep up, we treat the weak and the elderly like they are in the way.

That's wrong. The quake knocked down those walls and made it easier to talk to one another. It is only natural that there are all kinds of people. Fast people and slow people. People who know a lot and people who work a lot. The society is supposed to be the place where we help each other, teach and learn from each other, argue with each other by sharing our knowledge. Instead, none of us wanted to cause or be caused any

trouble. So we built a wall and stretched a barrier around ourselves. Old men, old women, middle-aged people, young people, children, babies, dogs and cats – we are all different, but we are all living in the same place at the same time. We must learn to talk to each other and take advantage of each other's talents.

Nothing will ever happen if we keep putting the blame on the government and society. We can start changing things by saying "Good morning" to the old lady next door. Slowly we will become friends, and it becomes interesting to talk to neighbors. We don't have to indulge them just because they're old. If you take time, you can hear a lot of interesting stories. You can laugh together. Being a volunteer does not mean you only have to give. If you're always giving, you both get tired of each other. Learn to help each other, to be there for each other. Share the good and the bad. To build such a society, everything begins with us.

Making a community where we feel safe about getting older

By Rei Nakajima, 60s, Kobe

As of April 12, more than half of the 5,500 people who died in the disaster were older than 60. Most of them were elderly couples who had continued living in their long-time homes even 30 or 40 years after their children had left. Or they were people who lived by themselves, some of whom were unable to move around freely anymore.

The April 1995 edition of weekly magazine Bungei Shunju ran an article titled, "30 days in the life of one Kobe citizen." It was about a middle-aged man who was found dead beneath the steel frame of the newspaper agency where he worked part time. The neighborhood of his apartment had become a burning field. His wife's bleached bones were dug out of the ashes. The landlord said, "I called to her, but there was no answer. I figured she had already fled." Since she collapsed from a brain infraction, she could not go outside. Even though the apartment building was not destroyed, she was burned alive.

In contrast to this sad article, the Asahi Shimbun newspaper's evening edition on February 3 ran an article about how the residents of Nagata Ward coped. Here's a portion of that article.

"Right after the earthquake, amidst the near destruction of 60 percent of the houses, people in the community did everything from fire fighting, rescuing and building shelters to cleaning the roads without government's help or order."

This active community movement has been working effectively since the 1965 pollution problem. One thing they do is regularly call on the elderly living alone. So they don't feel abandoned by the town. That becomes the security by which they are

supported.

A radio commentator Sachiko Murata emphasized this on her March 24 show on NHK public broadcast, "Welfare is Lifeline." Because a welfare network was already in place, people could cope in a time of disaster. She said that it is definite that the government holds some responsibility, but every citizen must take more interest in the welfare system.

For a while after the quake, I couldn't shake a feeling of emptiness. Until now, the welfare institutions for people at home never considered disasters at all, and they took living in a house for granted like the air we breathe. This has been an opportunity for society to rethink problems of the elderly. First of all, we must urge the government to create safe towns. We ourselves should work together to make a community where we feel safe about getting older.

A moment in the shelters

By Sachiko Hashimoto, 70s, Kobe

Living alone in this shelter

loved ones come to visit

father, mother, husband

they are all gone now

one by one they stand in the doorway

From the window high up in this shelter

raindrops trickle down

the window doesn't open

Even Chomei Kamono would say good-bye to this shelter

In the vase in the shelter

by the roadside bloomed the morning glory

it looks nice in the vase

the gentleness of the light pink

calls to me with a smile

The wind chime in the shelter

made of Meichin fire tongs from my home town

the quake has left only three sticks

but the sounds is clean and transparent

as it chimes faintly in the early summer breeze

I don't need Zen teachings nor Buddhist chants
I gaze at the passing clouds through the window that won't open
In a shelter where even the birds won't come
I only want to listen to the wind chime
and gaze at the morning glory

Never come back
the past 72 years of my time
40 years of my home
I want to forget the past
I want to meet
those whom I can forget

June 4, 1996

A month in the shelter

By Genzo Kase, 60s, Kobe

No matter what kind of catastrophe, it is said that a month in a shelter is the limit for humans. After that, everything becomes a power game. Tensions within human communication become higher. It's common to see the weak end up crying.

Worried about upsetting other people, somebody takes her crying baby outside. Regardless of the late night, she stands still in the park or the baseball field with her baby in the cold wind. Because there were few paper diapers (absolutely no adult sized ones) and no water, people panicked and became half-crazed. As the days of hard work and lack of sleep continue, people become worn-out and haggard.

Here and there you could see some old people just staring into space for hours, and other sitting in Japanese style, crouching without the slightest motion. They became incoherent. They lost all interest and had little or no reaction to the events around them. They were suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome. This condition spread to the middle-aged and elderly as well.

People who would have required hospitalization under ordinary circumstances were turned away because of damage to the treatment facilities. Under these horrendous conditions, chronic illnesses got worse. (In a circulatory organs specialty hospital, spinal cord injury patients were left to sleep in the corridor.)

People who lost their jobs due to the disaster didn't see the slightest sign of returning to work. Most unemployment cases were due to damaged port facilities. The unemployed were irritated at everything. They even complained about the smell of the compresses that elderly were using, so the elderly and the sick had to go outside to redress their bandages.

Children and relatives would come a long way by bus and train to visit. They would always say the same thing, "If there is anything I can do, please don't hesitate to ask," which the parents would interpret as, "I won't do anything special to help."

Hey, you. You didn't know your parents were weeping behind the building and wishing you would ask them to come live with them, did you? At night they found a dark place and cried.

(Editor's note: Most of the women in the shelters said they wanted to be asked to live with their children, but they said they actually preferred living alone. More men wanted to live with their children.)

For one month after the catastrophe, heating was prohibited. We stayed in the storage room of an elementary school gym, where there were no doors and the cold winds passed through. Breakfast was two pastries. No lunch. Dinner consisted of one pack of two rice balls. We were shivering in bad nutrition, influenza and the cold weather.

This was just a part of the report from a human experiment.

(Interviewed by Yuriko Nakazuchi, a director of senior home)

Kase, a former teacher, was living in a high-rise apartment building in Chuo Ward, Kobe, when the earthquake hit. She could have returned to her apartment if she accepted responsibility for the danger of her twisted building after the tremor. She had asthma, and she didn't have confidence to climb to the tenth floor of the apartment with the out-of-order elevators. She hasn't seen her apartment since the quake. In mid-April, she moved from a hospital to a nursing home for the elderly, where her friend was also living. Her friend retrieved her clothes from her old apartment and she bought sleeping gear in Kobe.

Buried alive for 35 hours

By Y.M., 80s, Nishinomiya

In 1987, I was 77 years old. I moved to the first floor of a two-story wooden apartments in Suehirocho, Nishinomiya, from my home in Sumiyoshi, Osaka Prefecture, because I wanted to live near my sister. I thought I would feel more secure. I paid my

25,800 yen rent from my 37,000 yen social security check. I made a living as a seamstress for kimono. Because my left eye was near-sighted and my right was infected with glaucoma, I had to wear glasses.

The earthquake hit when I was thinking about going to the bathroom. The moment I stood up from my futon, the second floor was falling on me. When I came to, I was in my *yukata* summer kimono, diagonally wedged into a 50-centimeter space. My head, face, hands and feet were smeared with blood and dirt, scraped by the pillar that became splintery like a squeezed and ripped towel. I yelled for help over and over again but there was no answer. Because I was stuck under the rubble, I had to use a cardboard box at my feet to urinate.

On the evening of the 18th, my niece escaped with the help of a superintendent who broke the small window of her flat because she couldn't open the iron door. She was the first one to look for me in the shelters. Since she couldn't find me there, she asked a fireman for help. I was dug out from the collapsed house and rescued 35 hours later. Before she died, my younger sister asked her daughter to take care of me in my old age.

After I was treated at the hospital, I went straight to the shelter because the hospital was full of people with really serious injuries. There I was finally given a hard rice ball. I didn't have my dentures, so I could only eat the inside.

In the middle of February, I went with my niece to my nephew's apartment in Sumiyoshi (a two-room apartment with six- and three-*tatami* mat rooms). His wife's words were very sharp and we realized they were not the right people to rely onto. We moved to Osaka's South Port Shelter. Mrs. M, one of the volunteers, knew the director of a Fukusei-en nursing home in Sakai, and she requested permission for us to live there. We were treated very well there.

Looking back on it now, I turn red with embarrassment because I was so selfish and rude to those who so warmly took me in during the first 10 days. Everyday at the beginning I would pack my things (the donated clothes) and say, "I'm going home to Nishinomiya..."

Due to the earthquake I wasn't thinking straight. But now I spent everyday in full appreciation. I can eat delicious food, and the volunteers take us to cherry blossom viewing.

The company where my 62-year-old niece worked as an accountant went under. Her apartment building is barely livable, but the tenants are all indecisive about whether to stay or leave. Being single with no work, she said the best she can offer me is emotional support.

I want to stay at Fukusei-en until I pass on.

When I was 10 months old, I caught pneumonia and nearly died. In elementary school, I went to the Hamadera beach with my family and neighbors and nearly drowned. Just when everyone was convinced that I was dead, I surfaced. From now on, I will live another life after crossing the line of death for the third time.

(Interviewed by Yuriko Nakatsuji)

When women retire

By Rie Yanagawa, 40s, Himeji

The earthquake destroyed all the old homes without mercy and showed no remorse as it attacked the elderly. The majority of the women living alone had finished raising their children and taking care of their dying parents. Having survived their husbands, they lived in old wooden homes like Bunka Apartment Houses. Barefooted with nothing but the clothes they were wearing, they escaped to the shelters. In the middle of the freezing cold weather, they slept with just one blanket (heating didn't start until the end of March).

Frozen rice balls were given out on the ice cold floor. It was hard to believe that more people didn't get sick. People became ill and developed pneumonia. Because it was so cold, some people inadvertently wet themselves. Because they were too embarrassed to tell anyone, they remained in bed and became bed-ridden. Some of them died from it.

Kobe's 23 special nursing homes have a total capacity of 1,720. Just before the quake, on January 1, there were approximately 1,000 people waiting for a bed. By the year 2000, the homes are expected to increase the accommodation for 3,880 people. Since the quake, the homes have started restoration in anticipation of a greater demand.

When the city advertised 35 openings in a municipal elderly-only housing with a bell to call a nurse in each room, more than 1,200 people applied. In other words, there was already a serious shortage on affordable housing for the elderly and nursing homes. Beds only become available when somebody dies. It is strange to hear that more than 1,000 sick people are waiting for a room. This was the reality in cosmopolitan Kobe.

Is Japan really one of the richest countries in the world? There are more than 5,500 disaster victims. More than half of them were elderly, 60 or older, who lived at home. What's worse is that most of them were women.

A woman, as daughter, wife and mother, takes care of everyone. In the end, she is left alone. Living by herself on a small pension. No social status. No house to live in if her husband doesn't leave her with some inheritance. If there is an earthquake, she is the first to become a victim.

These serious facts have made me, as one of the survivors, rethink the way women live. I'm fed up with a whitewash called, "Family love." I long to build a society where even those without family or with illness still feel safe and at home.

Where will grandma go?

By Tsutomu Ando

(This is written by Tsutomu Ando, a freelance writer who volunteered in Nagata Ward after the earthquake. Meeting and talking with many of the towns people, he put himself in the old women's shoes and wrote this story.)

Let's say there was an old lady, grandma. On the day of the earthquake, her house collapsed and she got trapped underneath. The house was built before World War II, so its collapse was expected. I'd like to tell you her story.

As it was getting lighter, she heard people's voices here and there. That's the old man next door. That's the guy down the street. Grandma raised her voice and desperately hollered, "Help! Help!" She could hear people rushing over. "Don't worry, we're going to get you out now, OK?" She could hear a saw, then the sound of lifting, and suddenly her body felt lighter. Somebody bundled her up, and she was brought out into the light. She was rescued an hour after the quake.

Many people, not to mention children, were helped in this way. Since then they've been living in shelters. In the elementary school gym there are more than 100 futon spread out and many of the neighbors sleep there. It has been a long time since grandma experienced this kind of cooperative living. It could be pretty tiring, but she enjoyed this way of life. Sometimes when she would look up at the ceiling of the gym, she couldn't help thinking about her collapsed home and her future.

"Should I apply for temporary housing? But moving to a place where I don't know a soul at this age is just too hard," she would think.

According to rumors, the city planned to turn the area around her house into a major street. The city was planning to build a high-rise nearby, but she had no guarantee that she could live there again. Even if she did, the rent would be doubled or tripled. She could never afford it.

"Where am I supposed to go?" she would gaze at the ceiling and sigh.

This grandma was not modeled on any one person. Many elderly people were like her throughout Nagata Ward and Kobe. The city engineers would open a map and look at Nagata and the surrounding areas. Looking at the collapsed houses and all the areas that were charred by fire, the engineer would question the future of this neighborhood. "What kind of a city should we build?" Most of the city planners are

wondering. If the buildings have remained since before the war and become a hindrance or so the planners think, they become all the more eager to rebuild the neighborhood.

In that plan, the previous residents are ignored. There is no sign of grandma's house.

When we think about the future of Kobe, I'd like to try and see it from this perspective.

My house will be gone!

"Grandma, they say that half of your house will be turned into a street. A several-meter wide highway is going to pass through there."

An elderly gentleman from the neighborhood came over to grandma sitting in the shelter. "My house will disappear!"

Even though she's temporarily living in the gym, she didn't picture her home as the ruins from the disaster. She imagined flower pots by the road and passersby praising lowers on her windowsill. That was her home. Now, half of that house would be taken away!

What would happen if a road became several times as wide as the old one? The wide road does not serve people. It is for the cars passing through. Grandma was aware of these fine points.

Right after the earthquake, the main road was jammed with cars trying to evacuate. What would have happened if those cars caught on fire? The main road would have become a street of fire.

It's a narrow street, but people use it as a shortcut from one main road to another. If the road gets widened, it will have even more cars than the present bypass, and it will split the town in half.

If that happens, she won't be able to chat with her neighbors every morning, and one of her life's simple pleasures will be taken away from her.

We knew one another's faces. We knew the neighbors well. That is why we collaborated in lending a hand on that awful day. All the townspeople. Old men and women alike.

What is the town council doing?

"Who should I consult? Probably the chair of the town council. After all, he's been the councilman for more than 10 years, as well serving other positions. Surely he would have some good suggestions. Unfortunately, he is not doing well. Considering that he is nearly 80 and has just survived a major earthquake, I supposed it is only

natural that he is suffering.”

“What has the town council done up until now?” Grandma didn’t know. Not only grandma, but the whole town knew nothing about it. It took her an earthquake to realize she didn’t know anything about town council.

A town council exists in every city. But only a small group of committee members actually knew what they do. Usually the general public barely has a chance to participate.

“But that is OK because we don’t need to do anything. Or so we all thought. If something happens, we will help out. Unfortunately, that’s not the way it works. It is the same for this small town, larger cities, businesses and schools, we can’t suddenly be of use if we have no idea what’s going on.”

Grandma’s town council chair had served more than 10 different positions in the ward office. He served on the town council as a chairman. Involved in election promotion, he was also on the town planning committee and sat as a director of the committee for children’s issues. If grandma wanted to get something done, she thought she just had to speak with him for quick results. But it was convenient and beneficial only for the city and ward governments.

For example, let’s say the city was thinking of a new town plan. If the municipal office got the committee to agree to the plan, we would assume that the city had heard the voice of the citizens. After all, the planning committee was supposed to represent the townspeople. This is how town planning has been conducted up until now.

There were some wonderful people too!

A person visiting from the neighboring town told grandma this story. “In my town, people gather many times a year for meetings. Hundreds of people would gather for the meeting.” Grandma wondered why so many people turned out.

“A long time ago, nobody in my town knew what the town council did. But then the city talked about widening the road. When we consulted with the town council chair, he had known about it. It was just too awful, and we had him replaced. After that, we started getting involved in flower arrangements, cultural seminars, and croquet games. We got to know everyone. When we come across something that needs everyone’s input, we circulate the notices about a town council meeting. We even get phone calls,” the person from the next town told grandma.

She was jealous. She thought of how much easier it would be for everyone to get together and decide on a course of action in emergencies like this. “Somebody would surely tell me what to do without my having to move anywhere,” she thought.

In that neighboring town, the townspeople got together and petitioned against the city's new plan after the quake. They have proposed a plan of the town that would make it more comfortable for them to live.

Grandma couldn't believe town councils that cared so much about their residents existed. Why couldn't her town be like that too? This, in fact, is what most of the grandmothers throughout Japan are wondering. Not just the elderly, but we too are questioning it. We pay town meeting fees because we are required to. But we are usually completely indifferent about what is going on in our own town. We should be ashamed. We have a lot to learn, but so does the government. The days when administration dealt only with the top people in town and went ahead with planning are over. Only few townspeople become involved in town council and town planning in Japan. Why doesn't the city government understand the beauty of those enthusiastic citizens getting involved?

"There is no point of submitting opinion letters (petitions)"

Grandma will never forget January 17, 1995. She can't believe that something like that could happen in her lifetime. Her heart still pounds whenever she feels tremor.

Grandma can't forget March 14, either. She can't believe that city employees would do such a thing. She will never forget the faces of 10 city officials who were blocking her way to the town planning hearing that she and other people were going to attend. On that day, she and her neighbors went to Sannomiya civic center. They wanted the town to wait longer before it decided on a plan to reorganize regional division. After all, it was only two weeks ago that the city told them about the new plans.

Grandma's back was hurting so she couldn't go to the Sannomiya meeting. But a close neighbor who had gone told her, "I just didn't understand it at all."

The city officials showed the people many blue prints and inspection files, but people couldn't figure out from the pictures and files that the plan would delete their houses.

All her neighbor knew was that she didn't like the road widened and more cars possibly coming through her town. She was against that. One city official told her she could submit opinion letters, but he added instantly, "Miss, there is no point in doing it, though."

Everyone in town petitioned against it

A neighborhood gentleman came to ask grandma if she wanted to go to a town

meeting in the neighboring town that the city officials had set up. It was on rare occasion that the officials would come to the meetings and explain a new plan. Grandma had heard that they hardly listen to people's request for explanation at meetings.

When they got to the hall, more than 80 people had gathered. There were no seats left. Everyone was really worried, and so the meeting began.

To tell the truth, the meeting was long and boring to grandma. Her grandchildren often talked about teachers at school giving long and dull lectures regardless of students' attention. She wondered if this was what the lectures were like. But she didn't need to worry. When the meeting ended, people who had attentively listened to the explanation raised their hands to ask questions.

"During the earthquake, we all escaped to the nearby parks, and they were big enough then. Why are they no longer sufficient? Nobody was left out. Nobody complained."

"You said you are going to determine this plan at the city planning council, can we attend that council?"

"You said you are building the high-rises for safety reasons, but look at all the buildings that collapsed during the earthquake. Can you really guarantee they are safe?"

Grandma waited for answers. What will they say, she wondered. But they didn't respond to any of the questions.

"The council hearing is not under our department's jurisdiction, so we don't really know. We will pass it on to the secretary."

That was as much as they would say.

The people got mad. "We want to be left alone. The city is trying to rearrange things to its own advantage, but we want to be left alone!" The audience burst into applause. Grandma applauded too. Somebody said, "Who is for the city's plan?" Nobody raised hands. "Who is against it?" Everyone's hands flew up. The city officials looked on with blank faces.

Grandma no longer trusts city officials

On the morning of March 14, grandma and her people gathered in front of the civic center. The metropolitan council hearing was about to open, and they were determined to make the officials wait to make any decision.

There are many elite people on the hearing committee, so the people gathered more than enough opinion polls. They made sure to clearly state the reasons of opposing the plan. If the city ran a main road through this town, the town that grandma loves

would be shattered. On that fateful day, everyone helped each other because everyone knew each other. But if that kind of lifestyle is destroyed, where is grandma to go?

“Let the citizen be a part of the town planning.”

Some 200 people came to the civic center, including television and newspaper reporters. Grandma thought for sure that the hearing committee would let them attend now. But her hopes were betrayed by a picket line of more than 50 city employees. Grandma had never heard the word “picket” before. But she soon understood the meaning as she looked at the 50 odd, expressionless faces that were blocking her way. But there was still something that she didn’t understand. Why did this happen? For years, she had seen leaflets with the slogan, “Kobe, a town built on the opinions of the people.”

She heard later that even some elite university professors agreed there was no need to let citizens hear the city planning council because the results were not going to change.

In the end, the city’s plan was put into effect. Grandma will probably lose her home and her town. It’s a very, very long story. The townspeople realized that they can never build their own town if they follow the planning board and the town council. They learned about the earthquake, as well as what the government does.

So now, when they see handouts given out by the city saying, “Working together with the citizens to create our town,” they get chills. The expressionless faces of those city employees come floating back. Even so, the citizens alone can not build a town they like and run it. No matter what, government’s understanding and support is always necessary. Grandma thought, “The earthquake was scary, but I’ve learned a lot from it.”

This was the story of a grandma in Kobe in 1995.

(Excerpts from Nagata Ward town newspaper, “Weekly News” 1st, 2nd and 3rd issues)