

## Introduction

“There is no social class in Japan?”

That’s not true!

Anyone can go to universities depending on how hard he or she works. Anyone can climb the social ladder and rise to the top. There are 100 million people in the middle class in Japan. After the disaster, we came to realize that they were all lies.

The earthquake shook all of us equally but it left us in different situations. Older and wooden houses were destroyed. More elderly women died in the quake than anyone else.

People who worked in large companies were the first to recover from the disaster. Land-owners were able to reconstruct their lives quickly. The rest of us without any assets are still struggling to put our lives back together.

Full-time employees and regular workers received more support than those without decent employment status. People with savings were relieved. In the post-quake devastation, age, gender and dependency on a husband often determined victims’ destiny.

The most obvious gender discrepancy in Japan is the difference between men’s and women’s paychecks. This has not improved for more than several decades. Women’s salaries are less than half of that of men’s. Women’s wages could not afford to build a concrete house. Once she leaves her job for marriage or child-rearing, she can only find a part-time job when she next decides to work. If she is divorced and has no children, she can’t even qualify for government subsidized housing.

This is why so many senior women live alone in old houses and apartments. And this is why they became the most tormented victims of the earthquake. A woman either works for low pay all her life or works for free at home only to have nobody taking care of her near the end of her life. Even if she is lucky enough to survive the disaster, it is not easy for her to rebuild her life.

In short, the earthquake made us realize that the worst form of discrimination in Japan’s social system lies in the difference between “a class of men” and “a class of women.” Female part-time workers were the first to be laid off when businesses were affected by the quake.

Devastated by the tremor, companies cut female part-timer soon after the catastrophe. Since big businesses sent relief goods and provided their workers housing, people began saying, “Big businesses are best after all.” There were people who moved to Osaka because their children had to study for college entrance exams. The

government forced families to take in their elderly parents since many senior citizens were left out on the streets. A lack of social services was compensated by “family love.” People were forced to live with their elderly parents. People recounted and revived so many myths about big businesses, education, property, houses and family.

It has already been a year since the earthquake. The town is being revitalized. However, the wounds in people’s hearts have not yet healed because many lives were lost only within a few seconds. Nevertheless, the memory of this earthquake slowly fades every day. As women who live in the disaster area, we wanted to at least keep a record of what their eyes have seen. This book only contains essays by a handful of women. We hope a small fraction of their voices will be heard. We also hope these voices will help to improve other women’s lives in the future.

**Women’s Net Kobe**