

NATIONAL

Curbs to stem COVID-19 in Japan may fuel domestic violence and abuse

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Actor Makoto Sakamoto, 42, known for the TV series “Liar Game,” made headlines when he was arrested last week on suspicion of domestic violence. Media reports quoted police as saying Sakamoto allegedly assaulted his wife and her mother in his apartment in Taito Ward, Tokyo, on March 30.

Around the same time, the eastern Tokyo ward had been gaining attention as the hub of one of the capital’s major COVID-19 clusters, with more than 100 infections reported.

No link has been made between Sakamoto’s alleged abusive behavior and the spread of COVID-19, but support groups have warned that fears over the new coronavirus that causes the disease may fuel abuse.

Activists say victims of abuse are also likely to face difficulties seeking out and receiving adequate support due to school closures and other government restrictions aimed at stemming the pandemic’s spread. Such undesirable side effects may be more likely to occur as greater numbers of people work remotely and children spend more time at home while schools remain off-limits.

Virus fueling domestic violence?

For some families, more time together isn’t necessarily beneficial. Time spent with family members may lead to increased acts of violence — physical, sexual or emotional — against a spouse or other relative.

“I’ve been informed that such incidents have begun to surface,” said Chisato Kitanaka, an associate professor at Hiroshima University and a specialist in sexual harassment issues.

Interviewed by telephone, Kitanaka warned that Japan may be in for a disturbing rise in domestic violence incidents.

An official from one of Tokyo’s 23 wards who oversees operations at a local consultation center for domestic violence survivors said they received 23 calls for help in March. Last year, monthly reports hovered between single digits and a maximum of around 25.

“Compared with the average monthly figure, that’s quite a lot,” the official said of the March number, while explaining that many of the reports came from people who had already sought help on previous occasions.

To highlight the growing problem, the All Japan Women’s Shelter Network, an organization that provides care and assistance to domestic abuse survivors, issued a letter to the government requesting greater support for victims.

The group is calling on the government to avoid shutting down or curtailing domestic violence and child abuse consultation services throughout the quarantine period, and to provide more information on where to find support.

Kitanaka, who represents the group, said victims are already facing difficulty communicating their problems during the pandemic as many consultation centers run by local governments are canceling face-to-face counseling sessions.

“If this situation continues for a year, it will become an even bigger problem,” Kitanaka said.

She stressed that support for low-income families was essential, as people in that group face increased risks of domestic abuse triggered by loss of income. According to her group, such incidents have already been seen.

In a report to one of the consultation centers, a woman was quoted as saying: “I had been preparing for a long time to leave home with my child due to domestic violence, but now that my self-employed husband is out of work and is staying home all the time, it has become difficult to escape and I am in despair.”

Abuse targeted at children

“Stress is one of the main factors that triggers violence, and people who are exposed to stress often direct violence at a child,” said Tsuneo Yoshida, chairman of the nonprofit Japan Network for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.

Yoshida’s group has warned that for many families, the home can become a stressful environment during this protracted crisis. He is calling on citizens’ groups and the public at large to provide more assistance for children, especially those in disadvantaged groups, during the pandemic.

“Child abuse victims often find it difficult to communicate their struggles,” Yoshida said. “Hence it’s essential that neighbors keep an eye on those who seem isolated.”

He suggested that children, especially those in families with a history of abuse, be given access to a safe place where they can play or study and feel secure, or placed in temporary shelters. It is vital that they are not left at the mercy of their parents.

“Many children in Japan don’t see their home as a safe haven, and these kids don’t have access to the care they really need even under normal circumstances,” said Yumeno Nito, 30, the head of Colabo, a Tokyo-based organization that supports marginalized teenage girls. “They’re more vulnerable in times of emergency.”

Teens risk sexual exploitation

There have also been warnings that teenagers and young adults are at risk of becoming victims of sexual exploitation both within and outside their homes.

According to Nito, many young victims of domestic violence see part-time work as an opportunity to stay away from abusive family members. But due to the virus, many such jobs are drying up.

“Usually, these girls earn money so they can spend less time at home and pay for a temporary place to sleep, either a hotel or a manga-themed cafe, but now many of them can’t afford to pay for accommodations outside their homes,” Nito said. “As the coronavirus pandemic continues to unfold, many children have nowhere to go. But at home they don’t feel safe due to the risk of being physically or sexually abused by their fathers.”

Such dangers loom outside the home as well.

Nito warned that children who appear to be wandering without purpose around residential areas are at risk of being targeted by sexual predators who are lurking on social media or are physically in the child’s neighborhood. She said teen girls from international communities who aren’t fluent in Japanese often become an easy target of sexual offenders who trick them into appearing in pornographic movies or working in illegal hostess clubs.

“Predators know these children usually have no one around to protect them and can easily approach them ... and pretend they’re offering a better job or other form of assistance but in fact may be approaching with an attempt to rape them,” she said.

Groups like Colabo have seen a rise in consultation requests.

“We receive calls and messages from girls fearing trouble if they return home on a daily basis,” said Kenjiro Tada of Bond Project, which provides assistance to teenage girls and women in their 20s. The group connects victims with consultation centers but also provides a shelter for those who cannot be accepted by government-run facilities due to age limitations.

Since the government began introducing measures aimed at curbing the pandemic, including school closures, “what’s changed is that those who are seeking help are now mentioning the coronavirus,” Tada said.

Tada warned, however, that younger people from abusive families may face trouble seeking help if they become infected with COVID-19.

As most medical consultations are being conducted via social media or telephone, Nito said “it takes a lot of time to grasp the victim’s situation as the conversation often breaks down,” she said. “Children who are victims of violence are unable to seek help when they’re surrounded by their abusive parents.”

Nito’s group offers free meals and beverages as well as a place to chat for vulnerable teenage girls in the Shinjuku and Shibuya districts of Tokyo.

Their camper-like bus with flowers painted on it, dubbed the Tsubomi (Bud) Cafe, will be parked in front of the Shinjuku Ward Office on Wednesday and April 22 and on May 6 and 27 from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., as well as at the entrance to Shibuya Jingudori Park on May 13.

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