

Homeless Women in Japan

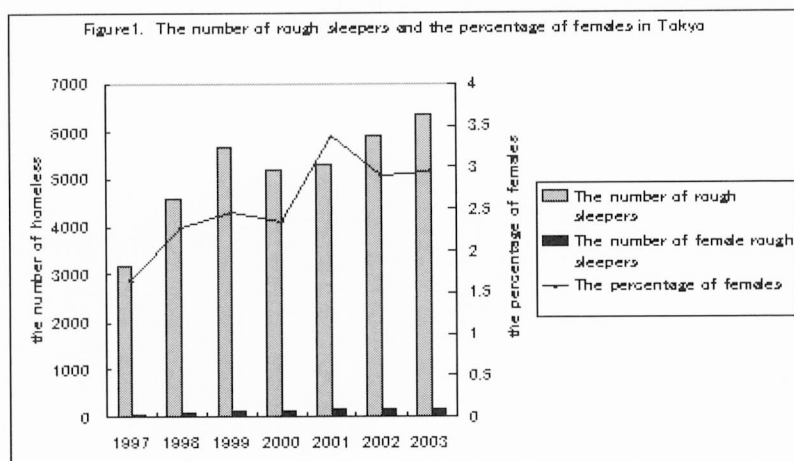
Satomi Maruyama

1. Introduction

Today many countries, whether developed or developing, have a problem with homelessness. In Japan, which is one of the most developed countries in the world, this problem has also grown since the 1990s, when the unprecedented recession began. In 2003, for the first time, a national survey of homelessness was conducted across Japan; 25,296 homeless people were counted on the street. According to this survey, the overwhelming majority of homeless were elder single men: the average age was 55.9 and the proportion of women was only 3 percent (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2003). As a result, homelessness is generally regarded strictly as a male phenomenon in Japan. This is one of the most distinct features of Japanese homelessness, especially when compared with those of North American countries.

In North America, homeless people used to be mostly elder single men. Since the 1970s, however, the homogeneous composition of homeless people has gradually shifted toward the more demographically valid 'new homeless' (Rossi 1989)⁽¹⁾ which includes a significant proportion of women. The proportion of homeless women is estimated to be from 15 to 35 percent, though it varies according to the different definitions of homeless and methods of research used. In Japan, the number of homeless women has also been increasing gradually (see Figure1) as in North America, but there is very little research on homeless women in Japan. For example, what is known about

⁽¹⁾ According to Rossi (1989), the features of the 'new homeless' in the United States are: a) that they are seen not only in skid row areas but also in other locations; b) the proportion of rough sleepers has increased in the homeless population; c) their level of poverty has deepened from before; and d) they are now younger and include a greater proportion of women. It seems that Japanese homelessness also shares some of these changing features.



homeless women in the first national survey is no more than their number.

Another key point in understanding homelessness in Japan is that the word 'homeless' generally means rough sleepers. As problems with homelessness have deepened in the 1990s, use of the word 'homeless', just as in English-speaking countries, has become prevalent in Japan. Unlike in some other countries, however, the word refers only to people who are actually sleeping rough and does not include people who have inadequate, temporary or unsafe housing, such as shelters, inexpensive hotels, laborer's lodgings, institutions and doubling-up.

If the term 'homeless' included people in these situations, the proportion of homeless women in Japan would be much higher. This is because homeless women tend to avoid sleeping rough. While some women leave their homes and stay in welfare accommodations after leaving their home, others are loath to stay in their homes due to the lack of alternative housing and means of support, even if they suffer domestic violence. If we include these forms of invisible homelessness, the problem of homelessness is no longer solely a male phenomenon.

The objectives of this study are (1) to reveal the circumstances of homeless women in Japan; (2) to compare the circumstances of homeless women in Japan to that in North America; and (3) to consider what kind of research on homeless is needed in Japan.

2. Socio-economic context for homeless women in Japan

Why is the proportion of homeless women so small in Japan, compared to North America? One cause is that Japanese society is, generally speaking, exceedingly patriarchal, and the norm that a woman should be at home is still expected. For example, when Siaroff distinguished four types of welfare states, applying a gender-sensitive perspective, he classified North American countries as *Protestant liberal welfare states*, where the family welfare orientation is minimal but the recipients of benefits are usually mothers and the labor market is relatively equal in terms of gender. Japan is considered a *late female mobilization welfare state*, with minimal family welfare orientation, but where fathers are usually the recipients of benefits, and there are no great incentives for women to be employed (Siaroff, 1994). Therefore, among the 23 OECD democracies, that Siaroff assessed, Japan is one of the most difficult countries for females to live independently.

Since the 1970s, North America has experienced a feminization of poverty. This refers to the phenomenon that female-headed families are becoming the majority of the poor, mostly due to the sharp growth of female-headed families and inadequate welfare policy. In Japan, on the other hand, it is generally said that the feminization of poverty remains invisible since its gender-based family norms, as an institution, are legitimized and welfare policies for single mothers are stigmatized. Women's labor force participation in Japan has increased: in 2003, 40.8 percent of women were employed, but 40.7 percent of them were part-time workers with unstable employment conditions and low wages. The wage gap between men and women remains wide: women earn, on average, 66.8 percent of what men earn. Moreover, the divorce rate in Japan is extremely small—2.7 percent (2003). As a result, the percentage of the female-headed family is low. What Axine referred to as the Japanese feminization of poverty would apply: "ironically Japanese women at this moment are not independent enough to achieve feminization of poverty; they can not afford divorce and economic independence" (Axine 1990; 104). In short, it is difficult for women to earn enough to live independently, and they are forced to be in their family homes.

Why is the gender gap in the proportion of rough sleepers so wide in Japan? One reason stems from the difference in the labor market participation between working

class men and women. Two-thirds of male rough sleepers had experiences working as construction laborers or manufacturers (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2003), but these industries have gradually declined in Japan so that the unemployed have become rough sleepers due to lack of income. For female rough sleepers, on the other hand, single women generally had experiences in the service industries, working in restaurants, bars, or hotels and as attendants in hospitals, for example. Married women generally used to be housewives or part-time workers. Due to the growth in the service industry and tendency for companies to employ part-time workers instead of full-time workers, therefore, low-wage and unstable jobs in the service industry prevent working class women from sleeping on the street.

The second reason for Japan's small proportion of female rough sleepers concerns the history of the Yoseba, which are day-laboring districts and similar to the skid rows of the United States. For example, San'ya, the biggest Yoseba in Tokyo, became a place where people with no fixed abode gathered after World War II. They stayed in flophouses and were mostly employed as day laborers in manual-construction work. Between the 1960s and the 1970s, when riots frequently erupted in this area, San'ya attracted much public attention. With the aid of public housing policy, families began moving out of San'ya, as they were regarded to be more deserving of assistance than single residents. In addition, female prostitutes who stayed in this area were removed by police or forced out by citizens. So by the 1980s, the residents in San'ya were mostly single males. At that time, some day laborers who didn't get jobs were occasionally sleeping on the street almost exclusively in the Yoseba. Since the 1990s, when the economic recession began, more people have been chronically sleeping on the rough, and rough sleeping has spread beyond the Yoseba. According to the national survey, however, 36.2 percent of all rough sleepers, have still some work experience in the Yoseba (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2003). Thus, it is necessary to consider the changing structure of the Yoseba in accounting for the gender gap in the composition of rough sleepers in Japan.

The third reason is the different welfare policies towards men and women. With regards to homelessness, the differences are more pronounced than in the general population (Iwata, 1995). The Japanese Government has responded to poverty mainly by Seikatsuhogo-ho (The Public Assistance Act). It establishes the right to the

minimum standard of living for all low-income Japanese people. For homeless men, however, eligibility depends on their ability to be employed. Only those who are unable to work — that is, the elderly, disabled and sick — regarded as eligible for public assistance. The majority of them are excluded from this assistance benefit when they are deemed employable. In order to compensate for this situation, Hogai-engo (The Outside-Law Program), provides a minimal of basic necessities such as food, clothing, medical treatment, and short-term shelters for rough sleepers. In addition, the first homeless legislation, Homeless jiritsu-shien-ho (Law on Special Measures for Self-Sufficiency Support for Homeless People) was enacted in 2002, but its effectiveness is arguably limited. Under this law, some homeless men have received job-hunting support while staying at self-help centers, but they are not always able to find a job within the six-month deadline and end up returning to the streets. These facilities for rough sleepers are targeted primarily to males; most of them lack facilities for women such as gender-separate bedrooms and bathrooms. Women, on the other hand, are generally regarded as more deserving of public assistance than men, so there are more diverse programs for homeless women in addition to those for homeless men, though these programs are not directly intended for homeless people. Homeless women with children are eligible for Jido-fukushi-ho (Child Welfare Law), and they are eligible to live in Boshi-seikatsu-shien-shisetsu (Fatherless Family Daily Living Support Facilities). Domestic violence victims are eligible for domestic violence boshi-ho (Law of the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims)⁽²⁾, which was enacted in 2001, and they are accommodated by Fujin-sodan-syo (Women's Counseling Centers) or domestic violence shelters. Single homeless women with certain types of problems are covered by Baisyun-boshi-ho (Prostitution Prevention Law), and they are admitted to Fujin-hogo-shisetsu (Protective Facilities for Women)⁽³⁾. Consequently, compared to homeless men, homeless women tend to stay at these various types of facilities instead of, or prior to, living on the street.

⁽²⁾ This law is not only for females, but accommodations for domestic violence victims are virtually targeted only to females.

⁽³⁾ Protective Facilities for Women were originally established to protect and rehabilitate women regarded as sexual deviants under Prostitution Prevention Law, but they actually serve women with a range of problems. For example, prior to the 2001 Law of the Prevention of Spousal Violence and Protection of Victims, they admitted domestic violence victims.

3. The lives of homeless women in Japan

I conducted multiple interviews with four female rough sleepers over a period of 13 months in Tokyo. Three of them had husbands; one was single ⁽⁴⁾. They lived in temporary shanties made of plywood, plastic sheets and cardboard (see Figure2) located in a park, where about 300 rough sleepers lived ⁽⁵⁾. Since 2002, when the first legislation for helping rough sleepers was enacted, services to assist rough sleepers to find jobs or seek public assistance have increased. At the same time, rough sleepers who continue living in public spaces have been assumed to be voluntarily choosing social exclusion. This places rough sleepers at greater risk of eviction from public spaces. Their living situations are threatened by not only eviction but also violence from citizens and other rough sleepers. The female rough sleepers whom I interviewed experienced severer violence than males, especially in case of woman without their partners. Of the four women, none were earning an income, but two were receiving a small amount of pension. They obtained necessities such as food and clothes from volunteers or other rough sleepers who made money. These women did not receive any



Figure2. The shanty of a rough sleeping couple in a park

public assistance, although female rough sleepers are generally regarded as deserving. The three women who had partners preferred living with them on the street instead of entering accommodations where they would be separated, as there are virtually no accommodations for homeless couples or families in Tokyo.

⁽⁴⁾ According to a survey conducted in Tokyo (Toshi-seikatsu-kenkyu-kai, 1999), 73 percent of female rough sleepers lived with their partners or friends, others lived by themselves.

⁽⁵⁾ Most rough sleepers build such kind of shanties. According to the national survey (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2003), 84.1 percent of rough sleepers have fixed places to sleep in parks, riverbanks, and on the streets, while others roam. One reason for the high percentage of people with fixed places is that the survey specifically targeted those sleeping in fixed places.

Some women repeatedly moved from living in tents to hotels or shelters, depending on their relationships with their husbands, neighbors, friends and social workers, and on their dislike of certain environments and the rules of some facilities. Their options were further limited by lack of information about what kinds of support were available and how to obtain them.

Besides rough sleepers, there are many more hidden homeless dispersed in various types of temporary accommodations — especially in case of women. Once homeless women consult welfare officers and are recognized to be in need of accommodations, they usually stay at emergency shelters for about two weeks while seeking to get income and housing. Figure 3 shows the number of residents and their reasons for entering the emergency shelter provided by the Women's Counseling Center in Tokyo. Since 1992, when the economic recession began, the proportion of vagrants and people who have no fixed abode has increased. While the problem of domestic violence has attracted greater public attention and the number of domestic violence victims has increased, they have been excluded from limited shelter space. Female shelter residents who cannot get income and housing within a two-week period are assigned to other temporary facilities according to their family situation or the nature of their problems. Figure 4 shows various types of temporary facilities where homeless women usually stay, although the residents are generally not regarded as homeless. While each facility has its own functions and target clients, due to very low rates of vacancy, women in need of tend to enter whichever facility has a vacancy at that time.

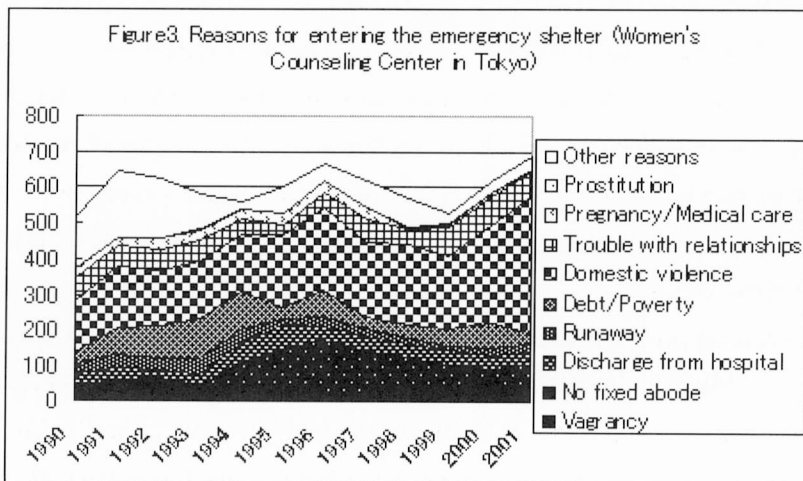
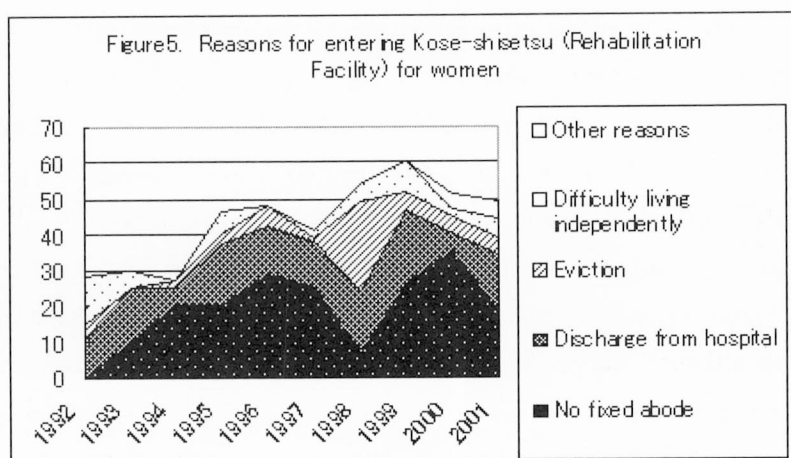


Figure4. The kind of facilities for homeless women

Eoshi-seikatsu-shien-shisetsu (Fatherless Family Daily Living Support Facility)	Facilities that provide accommodations and services for single mothers and their children, especially for mothers who require support with daily living.
Fujin-hogo-shisetsu (Protective Facility for Women)	Protective accommodations for women at risk, as defined by the Women's Counseling Center.
Kose-shisetsu (Rehabilitation Facility)	Facilities that provide short-term accommodations and services for individuals recovering from, or adjusting to, physical or mental health problems.
Kyugo-shisetsu (Rehabilitation Facility)	Long-term care facilities for individuals who have difficulty living independently due to serious physical or mental health disabilities.
Syukusyo-teikyo-shisetsu (shelter for the poor)	Temporary accommodations for individuals and families that do not otherwise have access to housing.
Syukuhaku-syo (shelter for the poor)	Temporary accommodations for people who do not have access to housing due to fire, eviction, high rent, etc. or for people with difficulty living independently



Consequently the differences between each become moot and the original function of each facility has gradually been lost. These facilities offer temporary accommodations from several months to several years, but some residents stay for much longer because of lack of alternative place to stay. Figure 5 shows that the number of residents at one facility for women has increased since 1992. Moreover, all the reasons for entering this facility, including eviction for example, are regarded as homeless problems in the North American context.

As the demand for such accommodations has increased, the private sectors and NPOs have established domestic violence shelters and Syukuhaku-syo (shelters for the poor). These private and NPO shelters have greater flexibility than public facilities, offering accommodations to women who are otherwise excluded from them. While

working as a staff at a female-only Syukuhaku-syo (shelter for the poor) for ten months, I conducted participatory observation and interviewed the residents. Since 2000, this shelter has been managed by an NPO that provides services for homeless people mostly around the Tokyo Yoseba of San'ya. Almost all of the 17 residents were receiving public assistance, and the shelter was financed by their assistance income. At this shelter, the goal for residents is to secure a more stable life. While there is no limit to the length of their stay, the average stay of each resident is about seven months. Most residents have a private room with a shared living room, bathroom and kitchen, and at least one or two staff members are on-site at all times. During the period of my observation, 26 women stayed at the shelter; the average age was 59.7 and half of them had some experience sleeping on the street.

These 26 women can be divided into four general categories; a) about 10 percent of the women moved out of the shelter to settle into ordinary apartments by earning a salary or with the aid of public assistance money; b) about 40 percent were elderly women waiting for entry to nursing homes that have very low vacancy rates; c) about 30 percent were eligible for public facilities that were too full to accept them; and d) about 20 percent were having difficulty living independently due to their mental health problems, yet welfare officers did not consider their problems so serious as to warrant enough support nor prevent them from finding places to live on their own.

4. Directions for new research on homeless women in Japan

Even in North America where there has been many studies in this area, homelessness is viewed predominantly a male experience, and studies that focus on homeless women are still few. From this limited body of research I will discuss some pertinent aspects and perspectives for understanding the situation of homeless women in Japan.

First of all, we can learn much from the studies that examine homeless women's circumstances. Despite differences across cultural settings, women in North America and Japan share some commonalities in their experience of homelessness. During the 1980s there were ethnographic studies about female rough sleepers in North America in which they were labeled "shopping bag ladies". Later on, for example, Rowe and

Wolch (1990) conducted unique research about the social networks of female rough sleepers in Los Angeles's skid row. As there are many shelters for homeless people in North America and their residents are easy to access, most studies about homeless women target women who use shelters. One such study is Liebow's ethnographic work (1993) of everyday life at a homeless women's shelter. Another type of study is more quantitative and compares the demographic profiles of homeless women to homeless men. For example, Burt and Cohen (1989) interviewed over 1700 homeless people at soup kitchens and shelters to compare some of the characteristic of homeless women, homeless women with children, and homeless men ⁽⁶⁾.

The second perspective we can learn from North America is related to the definition of homelessness. Although the concepts and definitions of homelessness are always somewhat vague, governments and researchers outside Japan generally adopt a broader definition of homelessness that applies to more than just those people who have no shelter at all. Watson and Austerberry (1986) were the first to apply a woman-oriented view of homelessness. They insisted that homeless women were far less likely than men to be publicly visible or living on the street, and included in their study of homelessness women who were in a range of situations beyond designated shelters. Various feminist researches have also included in the definition of hidden homelessness ⁽⁷⁾, such as those who suffer domestic violence but cannot escape from home. In Japan, however, battered women and single mothers at some facilities are not regarded as homeless even if they have no alternate place to live. If we adopt a

⁽⁶⁾ Burt and Cohen (1989) estimated that 73 percent of homeless were single men; 9 percent were single women; and 9 percent were women with children. Women tended to be non-white, and had more experience with marriage than men. The highest education level was seen among single women and the lowest was seen among women with children. Women's length of homelessness was shorter than men, and women's length of unemployment was longer than men. Single women had more history of mental illness than others, and single men had more experience being incarcerated. Compared to men who more often would sleep rough, women tended to use shelters.

⁽⁷⁾ For example, in the work *Common Occurrence* (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group 2002; VI), visible homelessness was defined as women who stayed in emergency hostels and shelters, as well as those who were sleeping rough in places considered unfit for human habitation: parks and ravines, doorways, vehicles, and abandoned buildings. Hidden homelessness included women who were temporarily staying with friends or family, or were staying with a man only in order to obtain shelter, and those living in households where they were subject to family conflict or violence. Hidden homelessness also included situations where women were paying so much of their income for housing that they could not afford the other necessities of life such as food, those who were at risk of eviction and those living in illegal or physically unsafe buildings or overcrowded households.

wider definition of homelessness, it would cast a new light on the relevant situations experienced by people who are at risk for housing. Moreover, by considering welfare services that are not only specifically for rough sleepers, but also those for the poor, single parents, domestic violence victims and prostitutes, the gendered welfare system and strong family ideology in Japanese society becomes evident.

Finally, I have gained an understanding of homelessness from a gender-sensitive perspective. Although some of the contemporary works from North America refer to homeless women, gender has not entered the analytical or explanatory account in much of the writing on this topic (Novac, Brown, and Bourbonnais 1996). A gender-sensitive perspective, however, would be very useful even in Japan where homeless women are few, because it would explain how almost all those considered homeless are men. For example, Watson and Austerberry (1986) pointed out that housing policy and housing market tend to favor the traditional nuclear family household, marginalizing single women and forcing them into homelessness, thus these differential policies and market factors reinforce the dominant modern family ideology in British society. It is also true in Japanese society. And following their example, this perspective offers a strong analytical frame to view housing and welfare policy as a system of engendering ourselves, and to see how this system can lead to the marginalizing of homeless men and women. Passaro (1996) showed how cultural expression of beliefs about gender and ethnic difference help to perpetuate the homelessness of particular groups, especially black men, exploring the situation of both men and women. Although her analysis risks essentializing masculinity and femininity, as opposed to a current feminist thinking which conceptualizes gender as performative, it may still be useful for understanding the process involved in the creation and perpetuation of homelessness as a process or the result of gendering.

In conclusion, though homelessness is regarded as predominantly a male experience and there is virtually no research about homeless women in Japan, homeless women can be found both on the streets as well as in various types of temporary accommodations. Further research would benefit from investigating hidden homelessness among men and women, and understanding homelessness from a gender-sensitive perspective. With such studies, we would obtain a greater and deeper understanding of homelessness, not just as a category of excluded persons, but also in

relation to people who have a place to call house or home.

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(まるやま さとみ・博士後期課程)

Homeless Women in Japan

Satomi Maruyama

Since 1992, when the recession began, the number of homeless people has increased in Japan. One of the most distinct features of Japanese homelessness is that most homeless people are elder single men, and the proportion of homeless women is extremely small, only 3 percent. As a result, homelessness is generally regarded as a male phenomenon. Recently, however, the number of homeless women has increased little by little. Another key point in understanding homelessness in Japan is that the word "homeless" generally means rough sleepers. If the term "homeless" included people staying in temporary accommodations, the proportion of homeless women would be much higher. In Japan, however, there has been very little research on homeless women.

The objectives of this study are (1) to reveal the circumstances of homeless women in Japan; (2) to compare the circumstances of homeless women in Japan to those of homeless women in North America; and (3) to consider what kinds of research on homeless women are needed in Japan.

Relative to North America, where the proportion of homeless women is 15 to 35 percent, the proportion of homeless women in Japan is small. This is partly due to the pervasive norm that woman should be in the home reflecting the exceedingly patriarchal nature of Japanese society. In this study, the reasons for the wide gender gap in the proportion of rough sleepers are explained by three factors: different labor market opportunities between working class men and women, the historic development of the Yoseba, and different welfare policies for homeless men and women.

Homeless women can be found not only on the streets; there are also many more hidden homeless dispersed in various types of temporary accommodations, such as Seikatsu-hogo-shisetsu, Boshi-seikatsu-shien-shisetsu, and Fujin-hogo-shisetsu. Further research would benefit from investigating hidden homelessness among men and women, and understanding homelessness from a gender-sensitive perspective. With such studies, we would obtain a greater and deeper understanding of people who are in risk of housing.