

19th IDRiM Café
28 January 2025

Transcription of the presentation by Nina Hakkarainen (via Zoom)

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So I feel a bit hesitant because I'm not a scholar, and most of you are scholars. So I'm an activist, and I run an NPO, so

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my thought may not be that correct sometimes. But I just based based on my work in our organization. So please understand that it may not be Scotland kind of correct always. But I'll try my best. It's kind of the obvious. It's mostly because in Japanese. You have to apologize first. So even I speak English.

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Follow the Japanese manners, which is really interesting. I found it interesting myself. Okay, anyways. But I'll start my talk.

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So as you already heard. So my name is Nina, and I'm originally from Finland. I'm in Finland at the moment. Actually, so I'm in Europe and so I came to Japan as a student almost 30 years ago. So I have lived in Japan for a really long time, and the name of our organization value comes from Finnish, and it means abundance of, so we hope that the foreign women who come to our meetings or use our support service could gain many good things through their association with us.

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I came up with the idea of starting a support group for foreign women when I was a member of a committee which makes policy proposals on issues concerning foreign residents to the Mayor of Kyoto in 2007, when we founded our organization. Foreign residents were seen as visitors who stayed in Japan for a while, and who eventually returned to their home countries.

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Information on services available for foreign residents and services themselves were very limited.

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In contrast to this view, many of the foreign women living in Kyoto at the time had come to Japan come to Japan through a marriage, and the Japanese planning skills were limited.

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One woman's child got injured and she didn't know how to call for an ambulance. So we started our organization to provide information on living in Japan to women like her.

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One of the important things for foreign women in Japan is finding safe spaces. Our 1st definition of a safe space is to create a space where you can get correct information that makes your life in Japan safer.

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Our second definition is to provide a space where you can build a support network for yourself. Living in a foreign country can be lonely at times, and it can be stressful when you have no one to talk about your worries and concerns. So we would like to provide a space where you can talk about your worries, and also where you can make friends.

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I think the biggest challenge along the way. Running an Npo in Japan has been that I have been running a nonprofit organization for the 1st time.

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so I didn't have enough knowledge of brands or how to manage staff and volunteers. Luckily the staff at the Kyoto Mpl center were helpful, and, thanks to them, we could overcome many of the challenges we faced, and when I heard you talking about the mentorship program. I thought that actually, we could also benefit from a mentorship program for people who start Mpos because there is so much to learn, and so many things that you have absolutely no knowledge of. So maybe in the future, it would be also a good idea to have a mentorship program for people who start Mpos in Japan and probably also in other countries.

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So I think the idea of mentorship program is absolutely wonderful.

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So then, we find that main challenge foreign women face in their daily life is the language barrier. It's relatively easy to learn to speak Japanese, but many of the foreign women can't read or write it, which means they are very dependent on their spouses or children in obtaining information which makes them vulnerable.

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We have not found a way. Yet how to motivate these women to study Japanese more? It is our

ongoing challenge.

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Another challenge for foreign women is the rigid structure of the Japanese labor market. Most Japanese companies hire fresh university graduates and train them inside the company through transfers between different departments and branch offices. It is really difficult to enter this kind of company in your mid Korea.

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It is also difficult to transfer the knowledge and experience you have gained abroad to Japan. So too often foreign women have to start their careers all over again in Japan, which can be frustrating unless you're able to get hired by a foreign company. This can also be a blow to your self-esteem and other Chinese foreign women face in their daily lives, is uttering. Foreign residents are not seen as a part of the Japanese society, but as a temporary addition to it.

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That's why, for example, many Japanese keep speaking English to foreigners, even if they can speak Japanese fluently, or it may also show in a form of so-called 3rd person responses. For example, once the restaurant staff realizes you are a foreigner or look like one. They stop speaking to you and speak to the typically looking Japanese person you are with. Instead, also applies to the job market, where foreigners are expected to do foreign jobs, such as teaching languages or doing interpretation or translation.

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This may influence foreign women's career paths by restricting their opportunities, especially opportunities for promotion or weakening their overall job security. Other ring also shows in the language that is being used when discussing foreign residents or foreign women in Japan. We don't talk about immigrants or immigrant women, because that would mean these people would be in Japan to stay, or at least there would be a possibility.

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Japan has an official immigration policy. It has policies on foreign students, foreign workers, refugees, etc. But not on immigrants. I have chosen to use the words foreign residence and foreign employment. In my talk today to highlight this issue, although the word immigrant can be also used as a tool of othering as well, and I pray. It is not that straightforward the challenges fringe face in their daily lives depend also on their life stages. For example, many foreign mothers struggle with the Japanese school system or nursing schools, because the system and their customs are different from their home countries, and they don't know how to support their children. In addition, the language barrier

makes it difficult to help children with their homework or to communicate with the teachers.

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Many children of diverse ethnicities face bullying in Japanese schools and the schools are not always equipped with tools to deal with this problem. Because of this, some poor women have decided to move their children to other schools or international schools, but the tuitions in international schools in Japan are very high, and most families can't afford them.

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Foreign women may struggle to take care of their elderly parents, who live in their home countries if they don't have siblings, or if their relatives are not able to contribute to the care of the parents, and when the time comes for foreign women themselves to move to a care home, there are almost no care homes where the staff could speak foreign languages.

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This is especially a big issue for foreign women who are single and have no children or relatives in Japan. So the issues foreign women face in their daily lives are very much related to their life stage.

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Then, during the covid pandemic foreign women face different challenges based on their language skills or jobs. We had arranged in person, in-person meetups for foreign women, but because of the covid restrictions we were not able to have them anymore.

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We moved to meet ups online. But we lost contact with many foreign women who had come to our meetups regularly before. And when we tried to analyze the reason for this, we realized that some foreign women didn't have the skills to use the Internet to join online meetings, or they didn't have the language skills to actively participate in an online meeting, an in-person meeting. It was possible to assist these women more by sitting next to them and using gestures, interpretation and, etc.

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To address this, we decided to move some of our meetups outdoors, because in Japan it was still possible to meet people outside. So we started what we called relax walks, where we visited beautiful places together, and we have continued these walks even after Covid.

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Another group of foreign women which suffered during Covid were university teachers who could only teach online. They had no opportunities for social interaction outside the Internet and were stressed out with these women. We started mindfulness meetings online, which we have also

continued after Covid was over.

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I have no experience of facing any of the major natural disasters myself. I have either been in Europe or in safe areas when they occurred. But after the talk of the earthquake in 2,011 I was in Japan, and the challenge of getting accurate and timely information was huge. I started to follow a Japanese professor of physics from the University of Tokyo to get correct information. The Japanese media was slow. The foreign media was focused on fear mongering, and there were a lot of rumors and false information going around on the Internet between the foreign residents, and the challenge of getting accurate and timely information was huge. I started to follow a Japanese professor of physics from the University of Tokyo to get correct information. The Japanese media was slow. The foreign media was focused on fear mongering, and there were a lot of rumors and false information going around on the Internet between the foreign residents.

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Our organization also takes part in spreading what is called plain Japanese, which is simplified Japanese, so that non-native speakers, elderly and children, could also understand important information.

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We try to use it on our social media website, and we give workshops to police officers, firefighters, social workers, medical staff and local residents on how to communicate. In plain Japanese with their foreign neighbors or people they try to help. We have also arranged courses for foreign residents on how to prepare for disasters and what to do when they have actually happened.

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That necessary information doesn't reach foreign residents is still an issue in Japan just in the end of last year in our meeting we had a European Union, a woman who had lived in Japan for 2 years, and she had never received any information on how to prepare for earthquakes. The strength of our organization is that it is run by foreign women.

We have 10 staff members, and only one of them is Japanese. Because we are foreign women ourselves. We are good at picking up the real voices of foreign women and passing them to local authorities and companies which provide funding. We are also good at finding the niches that no one else can see. For example, we have provided psychological counseling to Ukrainian refugees in Japan since 2022, and no other organization is providing a similar service to make foreign women's voices heard as the representative director of our organization. I often give public talks to local residents and university students, and even school children on issues foreign women and residents face.

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I'm also a member of several committees and boards of directors in governmental organizations that provide services to foreign residents, or make proposals on these services. To sum up, we define safe spaces as spaces where you can get correct information on living in Japan to make your life safer, and where you can build a network you can rely on during hard time, and lastly, a safe space is also a space where you can trust that you won't be harassed, and that's why our meetings are limited only to women, trans. Women included and non-binary people.

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We have also cooperated with the police on creating subtitles for their informational videos on harassment in public transportation and stalking, and we have organized a self-defense course for free women with the police in the future we hope we could define safe space also as a physical space, a shelter where you can escape from relationship abuse, and sadly, we receive requests for help from foreign women. Every week we hope we could build shelters that focus on special issues foreign women face.

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You can find more information about us on our website, paruyon.com. And mostly since I'm not sure how many of you are in Japan. But if you're happy to be in Japan, you are welcome to join our meetings in Tokyo, Kawasaki, Osaka, and Kyoto and also online. And we also welcome volunteers. So if you're interested in, please contact us, thank you for listening.