

Social Work for Female Migrant Workers in Japan: From Interviews of Pregnant Technical Intern Trainees and Technical School Students

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Abstract

In Japan, labor shortages have become a serious problem owing to the low birth rate and aging population. Despite the growing expectations of foreign workers, migrant workers' rights are not fully guaranteed. And in recent years, issues related to pregnancy and childbirth has become a major focus of attention. In this paper, the female migrant workers refer to the technical intern trainees, specified skilled workers and technical school students who stay in Japan for the purpose of making money. In order to analyze the social support required by pregnant migrant workers during their stay in Japan, 11 foreign workers and students who became pregnant during their stay in Japan were interviewed. We analyzed the difficulties they experienced and the support they sought from the perspectives of language barriers and culture and system. The analysis revealed that the difficulties experienced by female migrant workers are complex and intertwined, with multiple difficulties occurring simultaneously. And gender issues in Japanese society and the sending system in their home countries had a strong influence. Some of the support they sought required institutional reform, while others could be provided by people close to them. This is an exploratory research study. I plan to study the various aspects of this issue in-depth in the future.

Keywords

female migrant workers;
technical intern trainees;
technical school term students;
specified skilled workers; social work



I. Introduction

In recent years, the number of foreigners working in Japan has been steadily increasing, and as of October 30, 2021, the number of foreign workers has reached a record high of 1,727,221 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2022). As Japan faces declining birth rates, an aging population, and a shrinking labor force, expectations of foreign workers are high. However, human rights violations against foreign workers do occur, and previous studies have pointed out various problems with the system and policy (Miyajima and Suzuki, 2014; Moriya, 2018; Shikama, 2020). In recent years, the "unexpected pregnancies" of technical intern trainees and foreign students living in Japan due to border closure and skyrocketing airline ticket prices caused by COVID-19 have been widely reported. Since these women were dismissed from their workplaces or forced to return to their country when they became pregnant, there were incidents of abandonment of their children due to isolated childbirth. This is not a problem caused by COVID-19, but rather a problem caused by Japanese society, such as the lack of an environment that enables women to balance work with pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing, as well as gender issues, which were originally present in Japan and were brought to light by COVID-19. In light of this situation, the situation has not improved, although government agencies have

alerted the women's employers and others to the situation and provided information on counseling services. Support for these women is provided by religious organizations and non-profit organizations, and this support is not sufficient. Support for women migrant workers is needed.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Academic Discussion: Structure of Difficulties Faced By Female Migrant Workers

a. Defining Information

The recent cross-national migration of women in Japan has been referred to as the "feminization of migration" (Ogaya, 2013), "feminization of international migration" (Ito, 2008), "feminization of migration" (Minamino, 2017), and so on. Factors contributing to the increase in female labour migration include: increased demand for female workers in receiving countries, expectations of economic benefits from remittances from abroad at the national level in sending countries, greater certainty of women than men in sending money to their families in their home countries at the household level, and the emergence of values that affirm labour migration at the individual level (Koinuma, 2002), and the need for women's migrant labour is high. On the other hand, women are more at risk of exploitation and violence at various stages than men due to their sex, socioeconomic status and occupation (Koinuma, 2002), and women's labour migration is fraught with risk.

It is natural that living in Japan for a longer period of time means that women will face life events such as pregnancy and childbirth in Japan, but in Japan, if a female migrant worker becomes pregnant, she may be dismissed from her workplace or unable to continue her labour or studies. There has been a string of cases of women concealing their pregnancies and continuing to work, putting the mother and fetes at risk, failing to receive maternity check-ups because they cannot tell anyone about their pregnancies, giving birth in isolation, and killing or abandoning their new born babies.

2.2 Second Academic Discussion: Role Required To Support Pregnant Migrant Workers

a. Third Directional Discussion

Although this issue is gradually being clarified, such as the reproductive health issues surrounding the pregnancies of technical intern trainees and foreign students (Tanaka, 2020), the disadvantageous situation caused by the pregnancies of foreign students on loan scholarships (Saito, 2020), and the issues surrounding the pregnancies of Vietnamese female technical intern trainees (Sunai, 2020) However, the challenges are complex and difficult to solve individually because they are not caused by a single factor, such as being foreign or female, but rather by a combination of social and gender-related issues (Yamagishi, 2009).

In this study, we use the perspective of multicultural social work, which is defined as "social work for clients with diverse cultural backgrounds" and "social work that addresses psychological and social issues that arise when clients move to and live in environments different from their own culture" (Ishikawa, 2012). The "cultural barriers," "institutional barriers," and "language barriers" (Ishikawa,2012; Kado,2016; Japan Association of Social Workers, 2019) that foreigners face, as pointed out in previous studies, will then be the perspective of analysis.

III. Research Method

A semi-structured interview survey was conducted regarding difficulties experienced and support sought. The selection criteria were that the respondents were foreign women, had been either technical intern trainees, specified skilled foreign workers, or foreign students, and had become pregnant during their stay in Japan. The selection process used the kinship method, with introductions from support groups with which the author was active and from organizations with which the author had connections. After that, in order to obtain the cooperation of a large number of people, based on advice from organizations that provide support to foreigners, a call was made to a group of expectant mothers of foreigners living in Japan on a social media to select survey collaborators. The survey was conducted in person or online with 12 survey participants (of which 11 were valid responses). The data were recorded with the consent of the survey participants and transcribed after the completion of the survey. We then considered that qualitative research is appropriate for people like the subjects of this study, who are unfamiliar with the Japanese language and whose narratives are expected to contain a variety of meanings. We then employed the qualitative data analysis method, which is characterized by repeatedly returning to the original context to clarify the meaning of the narratives. The specific method began with the organization of documentary materials, followed by the coding of textual data, the consideration of the direction of the analysis, the creation of a conceptual model, and the preparation of a report (Sato 2008).

The status of residence at the time the pregnancy was discovered was Technical Internship for 3, Specified Technical Skill 1 for 4, and Study Abroad for 4. Their ages ranged from 21 to 29, with an average age of 24. The survey period was from March to June 2022.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Details from the Data Reading

Twelve female migrant workers who had experienced pregnancy in Japan were interviewed; 11 responses were considered valid.

The analysis revealed that "difficulties experienced" extracted 9 focal coding from 3 subcategories in words, 15 focal coding from 7 subcategories in institutions, 4 focal coding from 2 subcategories in culture, and "support sought" was 4 focal coding extracted from 2 subcategories for language, 19 focal coding were extracted from 9 subcategories for institutions, and no focal coding was extracted for culture.

Language-related difficulties were identified as <difficulties caused by the Japanese language>. The most common language-related difficulties were [difficulties caused by the Japanese language], such as [changing the place for antenatal checkups due to lack of Japanese language ability], and [difficulty in asking for advice due to having to speak in Japanese].

Within <Anxiety/Stress>, the following were identified: [troublesome communication with Japanese people], [concerns about childbirth and postpartum hospital visits in Japan due to lack of Japanese language skills], and [mental distress from the doctor's response due to failure to bring an interpreter for the antenatal checkups]. The following were extracted as <environment-related difficulties>: [difficulty in interpreting medical terminology], [difficulty in finding time to study Japanese], and [difficulty in balancing Japanese language study and child-rearing].

Among the <system-related difficulties>, the following were selected as difficulties in using the system: [Not having knowledge of the system about the system], [not understanding how to use the system or the procedures], [difficulty in using the system], and [anxiety about using the system through the company or supervisory organization]. [Difficulties in securing a place to leave their children], [anxiety about using daycare centers], and [consideration/selection of separation from their children] were selected as <difficulties related to children>. For <difficulties related to internship>, [anxiety on finding out she is pregnant] was selected. [Lack of support] was selected as the sub-category of <lack of support>. <Labor-related difficulties> included [unfair dismissal due to pregnancy], [threat of dismissal for taking maternity leave], and [working while concealing pregnancy]. For <difficulties related to housing>, [loss of housing after maternity leave] was selected. For <difficulties arising from the social system>, [confusion about a social system different from that of the home country], and [Heavy expenses on coming to Japan coming to Japan] were selected.

Among culture-related difficulties, the following were extracted as <difficulties related to sending money>: [stress due to worsening relations with family because of interruption in sending money due to pregnancy], [interruption or decrease in sending money], and [pressure to send money]. [Resistance due to differences in food culture] was selected as a factor of <confusion about different cultures>.

As for language-related support sought, <multilingualization of information and consultation services>, the following were extracted: [provision of information in native language], [provision of information in easy Japanese], and [establishment of consultation services in native language]. The following was selected as <multilingualization of communication>: [use of interpreters by medical institutions].

As for support sought in relation to the system, [support for single parents], [provision of childcare products], and [childcare after childbirth] were selected as <support related to childcare>. The following were selected as <support related to administrative procedures>: [early provision of information], [support for administrative procedures], [establishment of a consultation center for administrative procedures], and [support for administrative procedures from the company]. <Support for antenatal checkups> included [costs for antenatal checkups, chaperones, and transportation]. <Support for the exercise of labor rights> included [no unfair dismissal due to pregnancy], [acquisition of leave after childbirth], [establishment of a consultation center for labor issues]. For <desire to live in Japan>, the following were selected: [long-term stay in Japan with family] and [accompanying family members of foreign nationals with specified technical skill No. 1]. For <desire for cash benefits>, respondents selected [financial support in times of need] and [support for rent]. The most common request for <in-kind support> was [food support]. For <human support>, the respondents selected [securing supporters close by] and [establishing a consultation center for daily life]. The respondents' wish for a <review of the social system> was [review of the high cost of childbirth in Japan].

a. The evidence of the message

Female migrant workers felt <anxiety and stress> due to <difficulties caused by the Japanese language> and <difficulties caused by the environment> daily and at events such as antenatal checkups and newborn visits by the government. In terms of the system, they experienced <difficulties in using the system>, <difficulties related to children>, <difficulties due to internship>, <difficulties related to work>, <difficulties related to housing>, and <difficulties caused by the social system>. However, the lack of support increases these difficulties. In addition, <difficulties in sending money home> and

<confusion with different cultures> also arose, so that the difficulty was not a specific one, but rather a complex intertwining of difficulties.

Female migrant workers demanded <multilingualization of information and consultation services> and <multilingualization of communication> in their native languages. In terms of the system, they wanted <support for child-rearing>, <support for administrative procedures>, <support for pregnancy checkups>, <support for exercising labor rights>, <life in Japan>, < cash benefits>, < benefits in kind>, < human support>, and < review of social system>. While some systems need to be reformed, others require support from someone close to the women. While some items require reform of the system, others can be provided by someone close to them.

4.2 Discussion

This is an exploratory research study and will examine these factors in depth in the future.

V. Conclusion

Although previous studies have shown that female migrant workers, such as migrant women, technical interns, and foreign students face language, institutional, and cultural difficulties that are also problems in Japanese society, little research has been conducted on the social welfare and social work fields. In this study, the following conclusions were drawn from an interview survey of the difficulties experienced and the support sought by female migrant workers:

At the micro-level of social work, female migrant workers should be treated as individuals without regard to their attributes, and Japanese language education, counseling, promotion of cross-cultural understanding, guidance on systems, childcare support, labor counseling, and support for securing housing are necessary. Since the women migrant workers had many difficulties related to the perinatal period due to social influences, and the support they sought was also often related to the perinatal period, support by social workers specializing in the childbearing period was appropriate. At the mezzo level, it is necessary to promote the use of Japanese language classes, create awareness of consultation services, provide opportunities for cross-cultural exchange at the local level, and make information available in multiple languages at administrative offices. The female migrant workers' relationships with Japanese were limited to within their workplaces, and they had almost no ties to the community. Many of them were simply shuttling back and forth between their workplaces and their homes, and had very limited access to people they could consult when they became pregnant. However, they used social networking services to gather information about Japan's perinatal-related systems and to find people who could support them. To achieve this, the use of social media such as Facebook, in multiple languages is effective. It is also important to utilize medical institutions, which can easily capture the situation of pregnant female migrant workers. This is an excellent time to intervene, as pregnant female migrant workers were very likely to connect with health care providers. Since the language barrier was a strong factor, the use of interpreter machines and interpreters is expected. At the macro level, institutional reforms and subsidies are required to enable efforts at the micro and mezzo levels. Specifically, social workers will be assigned to the relevant offices, consideration will be given to pregnant women in terms of their status of residence, and family members will be allowed to accompany them in status of residence that does not allow them to bring their families with them.

a. Limitations and Further Research Opportunities

The first limitation of the survey is that the interviews were done through referrals from organizations that support foreigners and through calls on social networking services, which resulted in a bias in the number of interviewees. Second, by limiting the perspective of the analysis to institutions, culture, and language, the difficulties experienced or support sought from other perspectives were not captured.

Future issues include, firstly, conducting a survey that follows the process of childbirth and child-rearing in Japan by following up with the interviewees. Secondly, it would involve surveying technical intern trainees who continue to live in Japan after pregnancy and those who have chosen to have abortions, which was not possible at this time, and verifying the results from multiple perspectives by devising new analytical perspectives. Third, research will be conducted to utilize the results of this survey in the field of social work research.

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