

A child murder in Japan points to a growing social alienation

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When a 35-year-old mother of two, Mitsuko Yamada, murdered the two-year-old daughter of her neighbour at the end of last year, the case shocked Japan and provoked a wide public discussion about how such a crime could take place. The answers that have begun to emerge point to the deepening social tensions and a growing sense of alienation, isolation and frustration.

At her trial for murder in March, Yamada pleaded guilty. She had taken the child, Haruna Wakayama, from a nursery school playground in Central Tokyo then strangled her with a scarf in a public restroom. The child's body was placed inside a bag and taken by train to where the woman's mother lived and buried in the backyard.

Yamada, a former nurse, turned herself into police four days later and confessed. Obviously horrified at her own actions, she repeatedly apologised in court, saying: "I took the life of innocent Haruna and brought great sorrow to her family. I shouldn't be allowed to live."

At the time the media portrayed the murder as a crime of jealousy. Yamada's own two-year-old daughter had allegedly failed an exam for a place in the prestigious Otawa kindergarten into which her neighbour's daughter had been accepted.

The Bunkyo district of central Tokyo where the two families lived is crammed with private and public pre-schools and elementary schools affiliated with leading Tokyo universities. Only 70 children out of 1,500 applicants were accepted into the Otawa pre-school, which is affiliated with Ochanomizu University.

At her trial Yamada denied jealousy was the motive. She told the court that her relationship with the child's mother had become unbearable. She said the woman intentionally avoided her and ostracised her five-year-old son who attended the same kindergarten as the woman's five-year-old son. She was reported as saying to the police that by killing Haruna she would no longer have to socialise with the victim's mother.

The murder case received considerable attention in the media, opening up a public discussion on the highly

competitive nature of the education system and the often-unbearable responsibilities carried by mothers to ensure their children's success.

An editorial in the *Tokyo Shimbun* newspaper commented: "The deranged mental state that led to the murder was created in the daily relationships among housewives living through their children. The challenge for the trial is to penetrate the deeply troubled society of mothers that even produced the motive to kill."

The real issue that needs to be penetrated, however, is not how the "society of mothers" produced such a crime but how Japanese society as a whole created the conditions for the tragedy.

With their husbands forced to work long hours to keep their jobs, child rearing and the burden of organising the education of the children in most Japanese families is the sole responsibility of women. Among Tokyo's non-working middle class women a child's educational progress reflects back on the mother. Many women can come to feel that their only means of expressing their self worth is through their children.

Young urban women, isolated from their extended families and with little or no help from their absent husbands, can become overwhelmed by this highly competitive environment. A Tokyo psychiatrist Machizawa Shizuo speaking on the case said: "She was engulfed in a distinctive culture where the major interests are the husband's promotion, the children's school and the family's overall social status". Shizuo said she had an increasing number of clients who had nervous breakdowns due to the snobbery and bullying they had encountered.

Genturo Kawakami, professor of sociology at Shumei University and a critic of the education system, commented: "People have this illusion that if you go to a good school, a happy life is waiting for you. In Japan these days we are raising children as if we were training animals..."

"When I was young, relationships were richer, not only with relatives but within neighbourhoods. There were more ways of realising one's potential. But now the society has

become so narrowly focused that the only way we can measure ourselves is through IQ tests and school scores. Most mothers even introduce themselves by announcing the names of their husband's company and the school their children attend."

When the *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper ran a series of articles about Yamada's daily life and her relationships with other mothers at the pre-school, it received more than 1,000 letters, faxes and e-mails—most of them sympathetic to Yamada. "Raising children in a small circle of acquaintances is a stifling, lonely chore," wrote one woman. "Housewives who cannot bond with others in their neighbourhood suffer because they don't have anybody to talk to," wrote another.

Norito Hiramatsu, a mother of a child at the same preschool, knew both of the two mothers. In an interview in the *Washington Post*, she said: "They were friends at the beginning. But everybody eventually becomes a victim of bullying. We swap the bullying cap from one to the other." Describing the murdered child's mother as outspoken and wealthy, Hiramatsu said: "Yamada never expressed her own opinion, never revealed her feelings. The strongest image I have is of her nodding her head as she listens to other people."

Unable to express herself, lacking the prestige of a wealthy husband and the butt of the scorn and ridicule of others, Yamada got to the stage where the situation was intolerable and she lashed out. "I have empathy with the thoughts that Yamada had," said Hiroko Kusama, a teacher and single mother. "A lot of women share that—not as far as killing, but a lot of women are one step short of that."

While life in these social circles in Japan has always been intensely competitive, the situation has been exacerbated by the ongoing economic recession. Getting into the top places at every level of education and in social life is seen as an ever more important sign of success.

The latest jobless figures reveal 4.9 percent of the workforce or 4.39 million people are unemployed—the highest in the post war period. About 320,000 people, mostly in their 20s, were unable to find jobs despite having graduated from universities or vocational schools. The system of life-long employment once guaranteed by government and large corporations has been dismantled.

Under these circumstances there is even more pressure for parents to have their children sit highly competitive entrance exams in the hope of providing them with a more secure future. Children as young as two years old are now sitting for exams that test their manners and knowledge in order to gain places in elite kindergartens affiliated with prestigious schools and universities.

The idea that at this age children should be playing and having fun goes against the dominant philosophy in the

education system. One kindergarten director in a wealthy Tokyo ward explained this outlook saying: "I've been involved in early education for 30 years, and I've realised that parents want the best education for their children. What's wrong with competition? This doesn't mean cramming but giving the children a certain discipline that they don't get at home, molding them in the ways that our consensual society demands. For this purpose, nursery school alone, letting children simply sleep and eat is just too free. What we are really giving them is a sense of direction."

If parents can get their child into an elite school linked to a university the child has a greater chance of remaining in the elite system and not have to go through the "juku" or private cram school system. These cram schools can cost up to \$US910 per month. Children attend them after school from 5pm to 9pm at night to give them an advantage in sitting for the difficult entrance exams into elite schools.

The often-grueling schedule and financial burden can take an enormous toll on families. One family spent \$US1,800 per month for three years to get their 11-year-old son Ryohei into such a school. When he failed the exam both the child and his mother were devastated. "For several weeks he refused to talk to anyone or to meet his friends," said the boy's mother. "I was shocked too. It was a hard blow for the whole family. But after some counseling, I pulled myself together and apologised to the family. We spent a lot of time with Ryohei and though I still see some signs of stress he seems to be adjusting to his state school."

Japan was once seen as the economic miracle of the post war era but this is no longer the case. Economic hardship is generating huge social tensions. In so far as individuals can see no solution to their problems or those of society more generally, these pressures can have tragic consequences. Just as in the case of the series of school shootings in the United States, the killing of Haruna Wakayama cannot simply be blamed on the individual but rather is a symptom of a sick society.



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