

Poverty of Young Generation and Preventative Measures of Disability in Japan

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In the 10th edition of *Mental Retardation-Definition, Classification, and Systems of Supports*, American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR)¹⁾ states that mental retardation is caused not only by genetic factors, but also by environmental factors after birth. Many of the American textbooks²⁾³⁾ on mental retardation consider malnutrition as one of the most significant environmental factors that relate to mental retardation. Studies conducted in Japan on academic proficiency and behavioral problems also suggest that there is a strong relation between financial status of parents and academic proficiency of students. A child who is raised in a low-income household, for example, is more likely to develop mental problems later in his/her life.

Percentage of population under poverty line in Japan is the second highest after the United States. This statistical data calls for urgent measures to eliminate or minimize poverty as a part of the solutions to prevent mental

retardation.

Before seeking a solution to poverty, the nature of poverty and its history need to be understood. Beaudoin⁴⁾ summarized how poverty has been perceived in different societies throughout world history and how such perceptions have co-existed with the notion of social security. Beaudoin explained that the concept of poverty changed through three chronological stages as described below.

1. In pre-modern societies, acceptance of poverty in a community was seen as a sin under Christianity. Therefore, compassion was given and aids were offered by the people to those who were poor.

2. Severe poverty did not exist in a large scale in Europe during the Age of Discovery in the 15th and 16th century. Instead, poverty had shifted into a global phenomenon during this period as the western societies continued to prosper while Africa suffered the harsh consequence of slave trading and many of South American societies

were devastated by the disease brought from the western world such as smallpox and measles. Thus, the problem of poverty has become intertwined with the problem of racism.

3. The rise of industrialization and imperialism had influenced perceptions of poverty in three different aspects. Firstly, a precedence of social security system was introduced for the first time by Otto Bismarck as measures to fight the emergence of socialism. Secondly, nationalism under imperial control resulted in a stronger demand of social welfare and social security. Thirdly, under the influence of scientific advancement in the midst of industrialization, poverty was analytically studied and researched rather than explained by religious interpretations. Beveridge Report, which largely contributed to the establishment of various social security systems in England during the World War II, is a good example of a major research conducted on poverty.

In today's society, poverty is largely considered as something that should be taken care of by the public social security systems. Therefore, finding a problem within the social security systems could be the first step to solving the problem of poverty. In Japan, social security benefit is mostly allocated to the elders while there is hardly any benefit for the increasingly unemployed younger generations. This aspect of our social security system can create a negative spiral effect on poverty.

Expansion of poverty in Japan is feared to continue along with the stagnant national growth, as the unemployment rate among the young has only seen a consistent rise even

though overwhelmingly large portion of the population is occupied by the elders⁵). If this condition persists, stability of Japan as a nation will be in danger. The trend of high unemployment rate among the younger generations continues as the Japanese manufacturers opt to hire more employees in China and other neighboring countries in search of less expensive labor. While employment is also sought domestically, skills demanded by these positions are often too specialized for a person who has only received an average education in Japanese public school systems. Lack of professional expertise has given tremendous disadvantages to young people who are in search of a career.

Importance of vocational education has just begun to be acknowledged in Japan. While England has recently started to focus on the same issue⁶), Sweden has already established a practical educational system with a clear future vision, adding vocational programs to the middle school curriculum and further developing higher school vocational programs to satisfy the shifting demand from each industry⁷). Under this new system, Swedish higher school facilities are also utilized to provide recurrent education opportunities to adults who are out of skills that are required in today's industries. Sweden is demonstrating the concept of "life-long integrated education" to create a truly knowledge-based society. The necessity of similar educational system reformation in Japan cannot be over emphasized.

Reference

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