

Speaking out about domestic violence

By DAVID McNEILL and CHIE MATSUMOTO

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Just a year into her marriage, Emi Yoshida realized she might not survive it. Her violent, drug-addict husband had tried to strangle her, then beat her unconscious outside their Tokyo home. When she came to, he was threatening her with a knife.

Police offered no protection for her or her children. Instead of whisking her away to a battered wives' center, they tried to talk her into staying with her violent spouse, saying he "didn't mean" to inflict harm. "They said 'It's best the two of you talk it over,' " she recalled.

"If you beat up someone on the street, the police arrest you. But you're supposed to 'talk it over' when your partner is trying to kill you."

Now safe and happily in another relationship, the 29-year-old mother of three wants such violence treated as a crime like any other.

Legally, her demand has already been met: the 2001 Domestic Violence Law finally criminalized spousal abuse. The law has since been revised to include psychological abuse and threats, and allow for family restraining orders against abusive partners.

But despite — or perhaps because of this legislation — the number of victims grows year by year. A Cabinet Office survey released this year found that a quarter of all married women in Japan have experienced physical violence, and one in three has suffered verbal and psychological abuse.

Police handled 25,210 cases of domestic violence last year, up by 20 percent from 2007 and the largest number since surveys began in 2002. Activists say those statistics, and the 77 domestic homicides reported in 2008, are an underestimate.

"The issue is hidden because many women are too frightened or ashamed to speak out," explained Fumi Suzuki, a lawyer and director of the Chiba-based Allies Law Office, which gives legal advice to battered wives. "Partly because of that, spousal abuse has a very low profile in Japan."

Suzuki was one of about 200 people who marched through Tokyo's Aoyama-Omotesando district last weekend in what was billed as Japan's first public demonstration by domestic violence victims.

Because many of the women (and a sprinkling of men) still live in fear of violent spouses, the route was kept secret and most of the marchers — and their children — wore Halloween masks.

In a sign of growing openness, however, the march was supported by cosmetics retailing giant The Body Shop. Social Democratic Party President Mizuho Fukushima, minister for gender equality in the new Democratic Party of Japan-led government, sent a letter of encouragement.

Some Tokyo shoppers along the route applauded the marchers, who held signs saying: "We are not to blame."

All of which is a disaster for women, and men, according to Masako Nomaki.

"The (2001) law is infused with communist ideology and is rooted in hatred of the family," said Nomaki, a teacher and conservative campaigner who wants the DV legislation repealed. "Men and women can work out their problems if the government stays out of family life."

Nomaki accuses Fukushima and other supporters of the law of "brainwashing" women and trying to "destroy" society. "They render all the guilt on the male side, but male-female relationships cannot be reduced to laws and punishment."

"So-called victims of domestic violence provide courts with evidence that is faked, distorted and exaggerated,"

Outspoken conservative responses like that are rare.

But the underlying assumption — that family is the bedrock of a stable society and should be immune to legal intervention — is not. Law or no, the police and courts still make life difficult for women looking for legal protection, argued lawyer Mami Nakano, who also represents domestic violence survivors.

She said police and judges sometimes blame the victims for provoking their husbands and are still wary of being proactive against violent partners in family disputes.

"I recently had to argue with a family-court judge about whether to leave a partition in place between my terrified client and the defendant."

Fear, and the dearth of open public debate in Japan, keeps women silent. Even during last week's demonstration, many wore hunted expressions beneath the candy-colored masks.

One abuse survivor, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said she grew more anxious for her children as the march worked its way down Omotesando because spectators were taking photographs.

"I'm afraid that my ex-husband might get hold of some of these pictures somewhere and will learn about my children's whereabouts."

Suzuki acknowledges the sea change in legal protection for battered wives since the 1990s, when the issue finally began to percolate into public view.

"It's only quite recently — and not just in Japan — that governments began to recognize they must intervene in the family to stop violence."

But like many campaigners, she believes the state is still only halfheartedly dealing with domestic violence.

"For example, women can now seek restraining orders, but once six months has lapsed they must go to court again and reapply. It's an ordeal, and if there has been no violence during that period a judge is likely to rule against her.

"It took a lot of courage for women to come out in public like this and demonstrate, so in that sense today's event is really very significant."

In at least one area, victims' lawyers and conservative opponents like Nomaki agree: Japan's deepening economic woes will increase tensions within society, and the home. Financial insecurity and the loss of male confidence are traditional harbinger of interfamily violence.

Yoshida said she owes her escape, along with her three children, to social workers and doctors who told her it was not her fault her husband was abusive. "They told me the children would be much better off without a father like that," she recalled.

Her husband was found dead in his apartment less than a year after their divorce became official. Yoshida was so traumatized from her beatings that for more than a month after his death, she was convinced he was playing a trick on her and was coming back. Even now, two years later, she says he still haunts her nightmares.

Now studying to become a nurse, her work and children, including a newborn, have helped her back on her feet.

"When I ran away, I made a commitment to cut the shackles that tied me to my husband and my children to the cycle of violence. Now I feel so free," she said while stroking her youngest daughter's hair. "I don't have to look around when I walk outside to see if he is chasing me."

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Lifting the veil: Victims of domestic violence march through Tokyo's Omotesando district on Nov. 1.

DAVID McNEILL