

**2019 ASAKAWA Kan'ichi Award**  
**Student Paper Contest for International Understanding and Exchange**  
**Junior High School / Highest Award**

**Invisible problems behind a wealthy country,  
Japan**

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I am 14, and I have never been out of Japan to this date. I have long conceived of Japan as a wonderful country. Japan is rich and safe. There is neither a single person who is starving nor any dreadful terrorist attack ever occurred here. Japanese are mindful of courtesy and kindness, and beautiful four seasons and culture enchant many inbound tourists. I believed that Japan was loved and praised worldwide. I thought as long as I lived in Japan I would be happy.

However, such concept is changing. My mother runs a “Free Kids’ Restaurant” every week at our home. It is a restaurant that allows children to eat meals for free. I researched why many children were in need of a free restaurant. The search result showed that one in every seven children is steeped in poverty. The number of child-abuse incidents is increasing. Truant students are also increasing. I know that there are many children who suffer in Japan.

Maybe, Japan is not as safe and wealthy as I used to believe. Out of concern, I researched real situations, and found out about various problems. For instance, poverty is not only affecting children, but more severely affecting grown-ups. Women are in serious situations of poverty, in fact, one third of single women are impoverished. Women are discriminated against and suffering from many sexual harassments, and are being left behind from advancement into society. Discrimination against LGBT is occurring. Discrimination against persons with disabilities remains deep-rooted and many facilities including schools are not free of barriers. Discrimination against foreigners is apparent. At this moment while writing this paper, the relationship between Japan and South Korea is deteriorating and such conflict brings about a surge of biased words against Koreans online. It is true that neither a terrorist attack has ever devastated Japan nor few people starve to death out of poverty.

However, behind the brilliant image of Japan as an “affluent developed country”, there are many people suffering. Is Japan really a country that can be highly praised in the

world with such invisible problems?

In fact, discrimination and poverty are not just a problem persistent in Japan. How do other developed countries take measures against such problems? For example, in northern European countries with advanced welfare programs, measures have been taken to prevent emerging poverty by making medical, educational and delivery fees for free.

Furthermore, they have implemented an experiment for basic income and try hard to support people who are likely to become poor even with the support of basic income. As such, they are making efforts to positively tackle the problem arising from poverty. Concerning same-sex marriage, more and more countries are legally approving it. For discrimination against women, it is stipulated in a statute in France that a half of candidates for election must be women, showing positive movement to eliminate discrimination. As the number of women leaders is increasing worldwide, female prime ministers are allowed to take maternity leaves or take their children with them to the Parliament.

What about discrimination against foreigners? Discrimination is very harsh in Europe and America where immigration issues are shaking up countries. Terrorist attacks against immigrants occurred in some countries, where national leaders stood up and made messages that denounced discrimination. In Norway where 77 people were killed in a terrorist attack by a racist in 2011, the prime minister made a speech that paid respect to diversity. In the wake of the terrorist attack on Muslims that took place in New Zealand in March 2019, their prime minister criticized racial discrimination in a speech and immediately pushed gun control.

From the above incidents, we can understand that developed countries are more likely to positively address issues when there are people suffering from something. What's happening in Japan? Do we really endeavor to address issues including discrimination and poverty? No, I do not think so. In the Upper House election this summer, two candidates with serious disabilities won seats. Following the result, the Diet was finally made free of barriers. Why had barrier-free facilities not been in place until then? Is it because people have a prejudice saying things like "Persons with disabilities have no way to become Diet members"?

Issues of poverty are the same. Because we have a stereotypical view and often say "Poverty derives from one's negligence of duty", progress has not been apparent in taken measures.

Why are mindsets toward solution of issues such as discrimination or poverty different from Japan to other developed countries though issues in focus are the same? I think it all depends on whether each individual voices concerns over issues. In other developed countries, an individual in trouble or people who wanted to change something voiced their concerns in demonstrations, which brought about the change of systems. On the contrary, in Japan, there are only a few people who voice their concerns over problems. Following the nuclear power accident which occurred after the Great East Japan Earthquake, an increased number of people are voicing their opinions in demonstrations against nuclear power plants, but more people speak ill of, or look distantly at them than those get involved in demonstrations. In Japan, basically it is not well-received to show interest in politics. Even in school, political topics set you off from your friends. That is why we tend to refrain from changing a situation in the midst of ongoing problems and instead shut our eyes to it.

Next year, the Olympic and Paralympic Games will take place in Japan. For its success, Japan is showcasing its attractiveness to overseas countries. However, is Japan really a wonderful country with various problems being left off by only showcasing beautiful aspects? Facing problems of our own country, prioritizing politics for troubled or vulnerable people and passing history down to new generations must be factors to be praised as a wonderful nation.

At the Olympic and Paralympic Games, many foreign people will visit Japan and we will have more chances to take part in international exchanges. In fact, as long as our mindsets towards social issues, understanding of history and interest in politics are low, we will only be able to superficially talk about our country and the exchange will be ineffective. For more effective international exchanges, we have to look into social issues first, and positively address them.