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### **Karoshi: An Epidemic in Japan that is Becoming a Global Issue**

Japan is a country that has benefited tremendously from globalization and is seen as one of its winners through the country's explosive economic growth after World War II, allowing it to become the second-biggest economy in the world until 2011 (CNBC, 2018). Although throughout the past several decades they have experienced economic downturns and are currently struggling to rebound from the Covid-19 pandemic, Japan still maintains its status as an economic giant (Ryall, 2021). However, this has come with a cost. One of the biggest ones have been the wellbeing and health of its workforce. Karoshi, meaning death from overwork or dying from working long hours, is a social problem that has been a "silent killer" for Japanese workers since the late 1960s. Within the country's corporate culture, it is emphasized that the success of the company a person works for is more valuable than the achievement or prosperity of an individual. Since its "economic miracle," working long hours has been the norm for Japanese society. But as the economies of the developed world continue to rise, so too does the problem of Karoshi, becoming not only an epidemic in Japan but an issue for the globalized world as well (Hunt, 2021).

Karoshi is a socio-medial term in Japanese literally translated to "death from work." It has become a term in Japan used to describe someone dying from a heart attack, stroke, or suicide by working long hours or from work-related stresses. This term was first coined in 1969 after a worker for a newspaper died from a stroke in the late 1960s, but it wasn't until the late

1980s that the Ministry of Health in Japan officially recognized Karoshi as a major social problem. After War World II, Japan started to experience a "miracle" of enormous economic growth. To compete with the rest of the global market and to meet its demands, *salarymen* as many workers are called in Japan, were pressured to work long hours, often late into the night. A lot of those hours were usually and still are, unpaid, leading to the problem of Karoshi.

Japan's work culture is excruciatingly demanding. Working long hours is often seen as normal and honorable. There is a huge sense of collectivism and putting the needs of the company you work for over the needs of your own. Even though many employers offer vacation hours for their employees, many Japanese workers choose not to take time off because they feel guilty for burdening their coworkers with leaving behind their workload. 63% of Japanese workers feel guilty when trying to take paid time, according to a study conducted by Expedia in 2017.

When it comes to blue or white-collar type of jobs, Karoshi does not discriminate in Japanese society. It has claimed victims from every socioeconomic background. Because it can affect front line workers, middle management, or even people at the corporate executive level, Karoshi can be described as a "classless" type of death. And even though the majority of Karoshi cases have been male, reports among women have been rising (Ishida, 2000).

Matsuri Takahashi was a 24-year-old woman who was a fairly new college graduate in 2015. She had worked for Dentsu, a famous advertising agency, for about a year. She had clocked in an average of 100 hours of overtime a month. Unfortunately, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Day, she walked on top of roof of the Dentsu company building and committed

suicide. Before her death, she would regularly post to Twitter to express to the world the harassment she was experiencing and how work had taken its toll on her and her body. Matsuri's death received nationwide coverage, as well as international attention. Japan was shocked and saddened to see a bright, young woman take her own life. But this case would make Japan reexamine its problem with Karoshi.

Matsuri's story can be seen as the start of Japan's reexamination with Karoshi. It is obviously not a new problem; it has been an issue for half a century. But because her story received so much attention both nationally and internationally, and through the efforts of her mother over the past few years who became a labor activist herself since her daughter's death, the country and its companies in Japan started to realize that something needed to change (Lewis, 2019).

In the wake of Matsuri's death, the CEO of Dentsu, Tadashi Ishii, resigned a year later. He stated that he took responsibility for her death and offered his apologies to the company and Matsuri's family. Investigators of the Japanese Ministry of Health discovered dozens of employees at Dentsu have been working underreported overtime hours. However, the company was only fined 500,000 yen (\$4400 in US dollars). Dentsu then made attempts to change its work culture. They now turn off its office lights at 10pm to keep people from working too late at night and requires its employees to take 10 days of vacation time every year (Soble, 2016).

Shortly after the story of Matsuri Takashashi was in the news, the Japanese government started to make efforts to modernize its workplace (Demetriou, 2020). The country is already

dealing with a labor shortage, a decreasing population, and a low birth rate. And because so, the government is attempting to focus on its workforce by confronting the issues within the work culture. Under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a bill was passed by the Japanese national legislature called the Work Style Reform bill in December of 2018 and enforced in April 2019. It limits overtime to 100 hours a month, penalizes employers who violate overtime laws, and requires them to give their employees time off. However, some experts believe this law does not do enough and even allows for loopholes within the law (Ryall, 2021). In early 2021, the Japanese parliament debated to consider a four-day work week to combat Karoshi. According to Professor Teruo Sakurada of Osaka's Hannan University, a change like this would allow the country's workforce to be more efficient and "would enable more people to work fewer hours and be less stressed, which would in turn reduce the likelihood of karoshi (Sakurada, 2021)."

During the preparations of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Building and Wood Worker's International (BWI), a global labor union federation headquartered in Switzerland that represents construction workers from all over the world, spoke out against the working conditions of the construction sector in Japan. Before the games were postponed a year due to the pandemic, Japan had been preparing for years prior to the summer of 2021 and had hired a significant number of foreigners to assist with construction at its worksites.

BWI and with the help of another labor union in Japan called Zenkensoren, released a study in 2019 and named it "The Dark Side of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics." In it, they expressed great concern on behalf of the employees they represent over unsafe working conditions. The study urged the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and various organizations in charge of

worksites of the games, like the Japan Sports Council, to do more to ensure workers are protected. They released this study because workers had expressed concern about dangerous and illegal overwork. One had already died from Karoshi years before. In their report, they also cited another study by the Japanese Labor of Ministry, that revealed 21 construction workers had died from Karoshi in 2018.

The construction sector in Japan has been experiencing a labor shortage for some time now. The same report by BWI also revealed that for every construction worker, there are 4.3 positions open. They highlight that this is because the industry has failed to provide decent jobs and that current workers have been overwhelmed with an increased workload, leading to a dangerous and unsafe workplace (Yuson & BWI, 2019). The global community has begun to take notice of Japan's Karoshi problem and how it has allowed the exploitation of foreign workers.

In 1993, the Japanese government introduced a technical training program for young workers from developing countries. But a recent investigation conducted by the country's Labor Ministry revealed that of the 6,000 firms that hired 260,000 foreign workers, 70% of them violated labor laws through illegal and unpaid overtime. 174 of those foreign workers had died from Karoshi related causes between 2010 and 2017, and most of them were from countries like China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Pisey Eng, a Cambodian worker who was a participant of the program, stated she would be forced into working from 8:30 in the morning to 3 am the next morning (McCurry, 2019). Karoshi is getting the world's attention, not just through headlines but through the mistreatment of non-Japanese workers.

Furthermore, the global community has started to express an overall concern over the well-being of workers worldwide. A report released in May 2021 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) analyzed the deaths of people who die from work-related stress or from working long hours. It revealed hundreds of thousands of people die each year from working long hours and that the work-related stress can negatively affect the body, posing "an occupational health risk." In 2016, 745,000 people worldwide died from working long hours, a 29% jump from 2000, and that almost half a billion people are at risk from the dangers of working long hours. This study was significant because it was a first of its kind done on a global scale (WHO & ILO, 2021).

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General mentions that the Covid-19 pandemic has drastically transformed the lives of workers by employers adapting teleworking and making it the standard across different companies. This has caused major cuts to payroll and the closure of offices. This decision has led to people who remain on payroll to work more hours, potentially putting workers at risk for stroke and heart disease. He is urging the governments and corporations of the world to do more to protect the physical and mental health of all workers.

Globalization has allowed the world to progress in a way it never has before. More people have been lifted out of poverty, quality of life has generally improved, and human beings are living longer. Whatever the benefits are or however great they may be, the downsides of globalization cannot be ignored. The reality we must accept is that Karoshi is an outcome of globalization. It may be a specific social issue for the Japanese but by no means, are they the only ones dealing with this type of issue. It has become global. In the US, it may be

called *Burnout*. In South Korea, it is called *Gwarosa*. In China, it is called *Guolaosi*. The rest of the world has started to realize that people are overworking themselves to death.

The World Health Organization releasing a first-ever kind of global study about work-related deaths and a global labor union federation, BWI, that represents and connects construction workers from 127 different countries expressing concerns over workers' wellbeing reveals that this problem is bigger than the corporate life in Japan. It has become the result of a globalized world that emphasizes the importance of free markets and corporate interests over the wellbeing of people. BWI called their study, "the dark side of the Tokyo Olympics." It seems that Karoshi is a dark side of globalization.

Globalization has altered the habits of workers in Japan and across the world. For workers in the financial industry, someone in New York City may "check in with London when they arrive for work in the morning" and will not stop working "until the Nikkei starts up at eight or nine in the evening (Reiss, 2002)." In a time where industries are expanding beyond international borders and with the inventions of technologies like the internet and cellphones, the 9-5 workday has been allowed to become converted into a 24/7 shift. Not only has this increased the demand for more work per person, but it has also increased the demand for it to be done right away as well, putting immense pressure on the workforce throughout the world.

But even though Japan has one of the longest working hours in the world, it has not been beneficial for them. As previously mentioned, Japan was the second-biggest economy in the world until 2011. They lost their spot to the growing economy of China. Among the Group of Seven (G7) nations, the country's per-hour labor productivity is the lowest (\$46.8) compared

to the US which ranks the highest (\$74.7) according to data from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2018 (Saïdi, 2018).

After losing to the Allied Powers in World War II, Japan no longer had a military, so work was the only civil labor that was an option. Corporate work became extremely competitive because of the emerging global economy and with globalization. The proud "warrior class" became disbanded and was turned into "corporate warriors." The work culture grew into one where one was expected to devote their entire life to a company. And that culture was significantly changed into one where something like Karoshi was born (Luu, 2010).

Not that long ago, it was common for young people in Japan to land jobs after graduating university. But with the increasing importance of the free market and jobs becoming outsourced to other Asian countries like South Korea and China, this has affected the newer generations, leading to Hikikomorphism, meaning young adults who are usually not employed or in training, and are often university dropouts. They have been specifically called "NEETs," Not in Employment, Education, or Training and "Freeters," meaning temporary workers. The younger generations have been "raised by emotionally detached salarymen parents" and have seen what corporate culture has done to the older generations (Luu, 2010; Hattori, 2005). And because of this, many have decided to reject the traditions of the Japanese salaryman altogether.

But not all necessarily choose the NEET or freeter lifestyle. As previously stated, Japanese workers were pressured into working long, unpaid hours to compete with the global market during the country's booming economy. This naturally led to "corrupt corporate

practices and service overtime abuse (Luu, 2010)." And with the rising globalized economy causing jobs in Japan to become destabilized or outsourced, young Japanese people have felt pushed out of the labor force, limiting them to only part jobs. This has caused them to become either underemployed or unemployed, and with the inability to find suitable work, some have resorted to suicide. The jobs that once provided a stable, middle-class life for their parents has become less available to the newer generations of Japan.

The issue of Karoshi in Japan and the rest of the overworked countries in the world is an unfortunate downside of globalization. As the world became (and still continues to be) more interconnected, more pressure to compete with the rest of the world increased with this demand, resulting in a culture where working long hours is seen as normal for Japan and in other parts of the world. The socio-medical term Karoshi has become known in the global community as a word used to describe a workforce in a country in the developed world that has experienced economic achievement at the cost of people's physical and mental health (Ishida, 2000). Karoshi as a global issue, has been rising with the economies of the world. But if globalization has made Karoshi worse for Japan and in many other parts of the world, perhaps it can become a solution. If any good came out of the Covid-19 pandemic it is that working people in the West, like in the United States, have been given a rare opportunity of bargaining power as they consider a more work/life balance (Dmitrieva, 2021). Yukimi Takashi, the mother of Matsuri, understands that her country cannot change on its own. She believes "to eliminate Karoshi in Japan, to change our working style, we need pressure (from the rest of the world)." If we can achieve a type of working-class solidarity that reaches an international level, real

change can occur for the betterment of the entire globalized world. But to do that, we must understand how and why it became a problem in the first place.

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