

Satomi Maruyama (2019)

Living on the Streets in Japan. Homeless Women Break their Silence.

Translated by Stephen Filler

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This volume builds on ethnographic field work conducted in 2002/3 for a doctoral thesis at the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto by one of the first researchers on women's homelessness in Japan. Maruyama pioneers the scientific discussion of homelessness not only through the choice of topic, that is, women who represent officially only 3% of the homeless population of Japan, but also through her method: she conducted participant observation framed by critical gender studies.

Maruyama attempts to do three things: first, to systematically describe women's homelessness, a so-far unexplored topic within Japanese homelessness research; second, to address the question within gender research; and third, to explore what subjectivity can be observed via the individual cases studied and to link findings back to homeless women's practices.

The volume starts with a reflection on what homelessness means in the Japanese context in comparison with the European understanding and more recent research practice, and what this means in terms of finding homeless women across the welfare system and in select living situations. She claims that the narrow definition of homelessness, which constrains the phenomenon to rough sleeping men, halts not only the development of research but also that of more adequate policy responses to homelessness.

Maruyama conducts an extensive review of the changes in welfare policies relating to homelessness and destitution in the past few centuries, and dedicates special attention to responses to women's prostitution especially in the post-war context, and regulatory and service developments in handling domestic abuse and rough sleeping. For the most recent period, Maruyama collected her empirical data during field work in Osaka and Tokyo, focusing both on rough sleepers (living in tents in select parks) and on women staying in shelters (facility residents). She was member of a women's support group and worked in one of the facilities where she could

learn the life stories of a few women and could observe their trajectories back and forth between living situations and struggles to get the most effective provision. With the help of following up their daily routines, relationships and problems, Maruyama undertakes to challenge some gender study hypotheses (like the exclusivity of gender in responses to homelessness) and revisits the theory of the “autonomous subject” to show that those homeless women she got to know prove that there are target groups within the ‘politics of homelessness’ whose voice remained unheard.

Maruyama shows that Japanese research largely focuses on male rough sleepers’ and workers’ hostel-type of visible homelessness; but based on recent counts and registers, this approach covers only a part of the mosaic. She proposes reaching out to excluded living situations and hidden groups, and shows that it is justified to develop a more nuanced picture within the Japanese context, both historically and in contemporary society by addressing emerging women’s homelessness.

Women’s homelessness in Japan is presented as being bound by cultural-political and welfare policy contexts. Maruyama describes how women’s marginal participation in the labour market is mainly due to their traditional household labourer role, which makes them dependent on a male breadwinner. Given that Japanese welfare services are primarily designed to tackle male earners’ work insecurity, the marginal situation of women has not been addressed for long. To date, women’s earnings are moderate, at levels which challenges independence, enforcing their reliance on their partner’s income. Thus, divorce or death of a partner may put women into extremely vulnerable situations. Her informants all had such life experience, too.

Single mothers and women have only been targeted for a few decades with specific welfare services, but not under explicit homelessness provisions, which has been largely reserved for men. Women’s homelessness services are framed within shelters to prevent prostitution and to tackle domestic abuse, which also acknowledges that women have to be sheltered and housed. Maruyama claims that in contrast to what the workfare approach requests from males, in the case of women, given their traditional household labour role, it implies not so much an investigation of whether they can and should return to the job market in order to get served, but “whether a woman conforms to the dominant values of society” (p.91). She takes account of this question through individual cases, to explore whether women perform or fail to perform any hegemonic gender roles in order to get assisted by the welfare provision.

Based on qualitative analysis (institutional case descriptions and life path interviews), she comes to conclude that the strategies of women rough sleepers are largely common to both genders, except for hygiene and protection from physical abuse, and their more protective treatment by organisations serving homeless

rough sleepers. Moreover, strategies of forming communities, building up channels of information and reciprocal relationships all impact whether women strive to exit homelessness or stay rough sleepers or facility residents very similarly to men; this is in contrast to what gender theory would say: that being homeless is a rebellion against the traditional women's role. Maruyama also states that challenging the autonomous subject in such decisions has policy implications: the actual Japanese 'Self-Help Act' cannot categorise them appropriately and offer the most adequate services to them (including making people fully self-sufficient by bringing them into independent housing and offering labour opportunities).

The volume delivers a precise account of welfare policy development in relation to housing exclusion of women in Japan, thus, it represents a very useful resource for those interested in the design of responses in a different cultural and welfare context. The age and social composition of the respondents shed light on the vulnerabilities women – among them very elderly women – may face in Japan, which makes it especially interesting to compare with the life experiences of clients we have in the Europe. Powerful quotes of respondents (here we merit the translator, too) serve giving a voice to homeless women (as pointed out in the title), and give a tangible grasp of the agonies of the women interviewed. This analysis is a worthwhile ethnographic research read.

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