The Scars Of Japan’s Employment Ice Age

Japanese open up about the difficulties they’ve faced in charting career paths

By Yoshiaki Nohara Photographs by Shiho Fukada

The doors open only once. That’s how people often describe Japan’s hidebound hiring system, in which college students have their best shot at landing a coveted salaried position in the year approaching graduation. Those who successfully navigate the arduous corporate recruiting process will be rewarded with a secure place on the corporate ladder, along with regular raises and promotions. The rest are largely condemned to flit from one low-paying job to the next, with little avenue for advancement and zero job security.

The divide was solidifying when I finished college in 2000. It had been a decade since Japan’s bubble economy had collapsed, and employers drastically scaled back new hires to protect older workers. The labor market had entered an “ice age,” according to media reports.

Having watched my older brother struggle to establish himself in a career, I chose to emigrate to the U.S. to pursue my interest in journalism. Over the years, I read stories about the travails of the so-called lost generation. Faced with limited job prospects, many ended up single and childless. Japan’s 2015 census revealed there were 3.4 million people in their 40s and 50s who had not married and lived with their parents.

It was a brutal knife attack in May 2019, in which the perpetrator was a man in his 50s who had been out of work for many years and living with relatives, that got me thinking about profiling people whose lives had been disrupted by the employment ice age. From a news perspective, the timing was propitious: A month after the attack, the government unveiled plans to help those who were shut out of the labor market in their 20s land full-time positions, with a goal of assisting 300,000 over three years.

There was no shortage of potential subjects for my project. Japan has an estimated 613,000 middle-aged *hikikomori*, a term usually used to describe socially withdrawn adolescents who hole up in their bedrooms, according to the results of a government survey released in March of last year. Among those in their early 40s, as many as one in three said they had become shut-ins because they had trouble finding or settling into a job after finishing school.

Locating interview subjects didn’t prove as difficult as getting them to open up to a journalist. It helped that we were of the same generation. Still, many were so deeply ashamed about their failure to become successful adults in the mold of their parents that our conversations were awkward and painful. I was heartened when a social worker put me in touch with a client who was undergoing rehabilitation to reenter the work world and also when I met hikikomori who had overcome their own isolation and were helping others do the same. Those encounters left me hopeful that for a few, the doors might open once again.

Edited by
Cristina Lindblad

The 8050 Problem

It took a gruesome crime to get Michinao Kono to take control of his life. In May 2019 a knife-wielding man attacked a group of people waiting at a bus stop in Kawasaki, killing two and wounding 18 others, including more than a dozen school children, before stabbing himself to death. News coverage alluded to the "8050 problem," a reference to reclusive, middle-aged Japanese who live with their elderly parents.

The label applied to Kono, an out-of-work 45-year-old who never left his parents' home in Nara. He was rattled by the thought that Japanese society viewed people like him as ticking time bombs. "There's no chance I would commit a crime like this, but I thought, I have to stop being a shut-in, because my economic situation is heading for a dead end," he says.

Kono seemed destined from birth to have a promising future. His father was employed by one of Japan's legendary trading houses, the industry-spanning conglomerates that were the backbone of the postwar economy. He earned enough to afford a car and a home with a front yard, which marked the family as well-to-do in a country that embraced the phrase "100 million, all in the middle class."

▲ Kono never moved out of his parents' home

Kono himself got into Kyoto University, Japan's second-oldest university and one of its most selective, but his lack of social skills made him a loner. He says that was a result of being bullied in middle school.

During his third and fourth years in college, Kono's mailbox started overflowing with recruitment brochures, same as the rest of his classmates. (Even during the economic malaise of the 1990s, ▶

◀ Kyoto University students were in demand.) Still, he didn't take part in the highly choreographed ritual called *shushoku katsudo* ("job-hunting activity") in which university students don black or navy suits to attend packed recruiting events and submit to marathon group interviews.

Kono frequently skipped classes, so that after eight years at university he still hadn't accumulated enough credits to graduate, which made him ineligible to stay on. By that time, the stream of pamphlets had dried up, and he made no attempt to look for work. "It was in the employment ice age," he explains. "I thought even if I tried, it would be in vain."

He holed up in his parents' house. Days became weeks became months became years. When he felt up to it, he'd attend concerts by the all-girl pop group Morning Musume. He booked himself on cheap flights to East and Southeast Asia. "In my mind, I knew I was going nowhere and I'd better quit," he recalls. His parents gave him money for incidentals, and he paid for more expensive items with credit cards, racking up about 3 million yen ($28,400) in charges before defaulting. Now he and his parents live off Kono's father's pension. "I dug my own hole. I avoided reality. My life derailed quite a bit," he says.

Amid the coverage of the knife rampage, Kono came across Takaaki Yamada, who runs a nonprofit in Kyoto, an hour's drive from Kono's home. The group reaches out to middle-aged shut-ins and their aging parents and hosts meetings where they get together and share their stories. "Many parents are truly devastated with their children being withdrawn for a long time," Yamada explains. "We have to connect with them" before the parents die and their children are left behind. (It was Yamada who put me in touch with Kono.)

In the summer of 2019, Kono applied for three clerical jobs that the city of Takarazuka created to help people frozen out of the job market during the employment ice age. He had no idea he'd be competing with 1,815 other applicants from all over Japan.

Takarazuka's mayor, Tomoko Nakagawa, who is 73, says she regrets not having done more to address the diminishing career prospects for this generation when she was a national lawmaker from 1996 to 2003, even after watching her own son and daughter, now in their 40s, struggle to find jobs. "I didn't see the essence of this problem," she says. "This is the generation that was forced to swim in the murky water."

Kono didn't land one of the spots, which would have required him to rent an apartment for himself for the first time to avoid a 90-minute commute each way. In November he took a job as a dishwasher at a ramen restaurant, thinking that if he learned the ropes, he might be able to run his own eatery one day. He spent long hours on his feet, often working past midnight, and earned roughly 150,000 yen per month, just slightly over minimum wage. He quit in early January. "It wiped me out physically," he says.

At Kono's invitation, I travel to Nara in mid-January to attend a session of the self-help group he's been leading since July 2019. The gig is unpaid, but it motivated him to get business cards printed, and it adds a line to his bare résumé as he looks for regular work.

When I arrive at the address he's given me, I climb the stairs and see a sign that reads "Meeting Room 3: A Citizens' Group to Consider the 8050 Problem." Besides Kono, the room holds 10 other people. He kicks off the session by recounting his own personal story. A 33-year-old man then says he's been homebound for several years since dropping out of graduate school. A 46-year-old woman living with her mother says she's too weak to work after being a shut-in for years. A 44-year-old man with a college degree wonders how long he can stand doing menial work, such as distributing flyers.

A man in his late 70s talks about his son, who since failing a college entrance exam two decades ago spends his days in his room, most likely watching TV and surfing the internet, he says. "Do you talk with him about what he wants to do in the future?" Kono asks, sitting at the table with his arms crossed. The father says they had once, but not any longer. When Kono asks if the young man has any friends, the older man answers, "None."

As I listen, I remember a conversation in which Kono told me his father used to hassle him about getting a job, but the two of them no longer talk about the future. He told me he's more conscious that his parents are nearing the end of their lives: His father no longer drives, and his mother's spine is bent with age. "I'd like to get back on my feet and assure them while they are alive," he said.

When I check in with Kono in September, he tells me the monthly gatherings he organizes were canceled from March through May because of the pandemic but resumed in June. He's applied for several government clerical jobs earmarked for members of the lost generation. He was turned down for three and is waiting to hear back on others. He says that with private companies cutting back hiring during the Covid-19 recession, programs like these are probably his only option: "This is my last chance to reenter the society."

"I dug my own hole. I avoided reality. My life derailed quite a bit"

For Women, Mostly Dead-End Jobs

On paper, Yu Takekawa is the embodiment of the liberated Japanese woman, a still-rare species in a country where traditional attitudes about gender roles have been slow to evolve despite government policies designed to speed change. She has a master's degree, worked full time at four companies, and published two novels.

◀ Takekawa lost her contract job in March

In reality, Takekawa, 38, has been unemployed since March and scrapes by on her unemployment benefits and savings. She regularly skips dinner to save money, and she can't remember the last time she took a vacation. Her one consolation is that the pandemic has allowed her the time to finish writing her third book, which will net her a modest sum when she delivers it to her publisher. "Without the novel, I really think my life would've gone off the cliff," Takekawa said when I called her at home in Yokohama in July. "My job hunting was going nowhere during the pandemic."

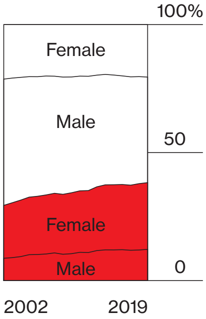
I first interviewed Takekawa in January, at a youth center in Yokohama that also offers career counseling. She asked to be identified by her pen name only. A few weeks earlier, she'd been notified that her work contract at a trade publisher would not be renewed in the spring, and she didn't want friends and acquaintances to know her predicament.

Like many in her generation, Takekawa has struggled to find her footing in the work world. She attended Rikkyo University, a well-regarded liberal arts school in Tokyo, and began job hunting while still a junior, as is customary in Japan. Although she'd chosen to major in German literature, she made the strategic decision to seek employment at a distribution company, because she figured ▶

▼ Share of Japan's employed workers

☐ Regular workers*

🟥 Contract and other



*FULL-TIME WORKERS WHOSE EMPLOYMENT IS NOT LIMITED IN DURATION. DATA: MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND COMMUNICATIONS

◀ these types of businesses had better odds of surviving Japan's recurring recessions.

A law that sought to ensure equal employment opportunities for women had been in place for almost two decades, but old customs and habits persisted. Takekawa recalls that during group interviews, recruiters peppered the male candidates with questions and turned to the women as an afterthought. "I felt women were not even considered," she says. "I figured I wouldn't make it."

When no offers materialized, Takekawa enrolled in a graduate program in German literature, hoping the job market would improve by the time she needed to resume her search. In the spring of 2005, she was standing on a train platform when she was overwhelmed by anxiety. Her hands trembled, and she was drenched in sweat. Doctors returned a diagnosis of panic disorder. "It's never been cured completely," she says.

After completing her studies, Takekawa landed a full-time job at a large homebuilder in Tokyo, editing brochures and catalogs. Her father had worked as a salesman for the same employer his entire adult life, and his 24-year-old daughter assumed she'd be able to do the same if she so desired.

But there was a catch: Takekawa's position was noncareer track. Almost all previous hires had been single women who still lived with their parents, which is why the job paid 30% less than what male colleagues earned in career-track jobs doing essentially the same work. The expectation was that the women would quit once they wed. Frustrated by the lack of prospects, Takekawa left after two and a half years.

The pay at her next job as a reporter at a trade newspaper, was better. And she was spared the indignity of having to serve tea to her male colleagues. But Takekawa sometimes had to put in long hours at the 15-person business, which negatively affected her health, she says. She began taking antidepressants and quit at the end of 2010 so she could return to Yokohama. "I thought I needed to move closer to my family," she says. "I needed to rest."

By then, Japan's first lost decade had stretched into a second. To cut costs and protect older workers, businesses resorted to temporary contracts, which offer less pay and skimpier benefits. Those jobs are the first to be cut during a downturn but also the first to be added back during a recovery. A new underclass of nonregular workers was created, which today makes up about 40% of Japan's labor force. Women represented 68% of this contingent in 2019, Takekawa among them. Her most recent job was at a Yokohama bureau of a newspaper that covers the construction industry. She worked there almost five years, but on six-month contracts. Her take-home pay was around 150,000 yen (about $1,400) a month.

Still, the job had its benefits: Takekawa's commute was short, and her working hours were fixed from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., allowing her time to indulge one of her passions: writing fiction. She penned a short story that won an award in 2016 and then published two historical novels, which were written up in national papers. "It helps my mental health significantly that I can get paid for doing what I want to do," she says.

Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe frequently boasted that a record number of Japanese women found work outside the home during his tenure. His administration also pushed for equal pay for equal work. "They never helped me," Takekawa says of Abe's labor policies.

She's been searching for work but is doubtful she'll ever know the job security her father and others of his generation enjoyed. Takekawa used to think there was a reliable path for most people, including herself. "At some point it vanished for me," she says before stepping out of the youth center and into the crowded street.

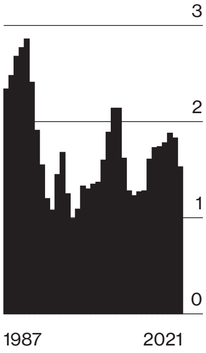
Creating a Safe Space

Inside the packed restaurant, about 40 people chatted and laughed, drinks in hand. It was November 2019—months before the world would learn that a lethal virus had been silently stalking humans—and this was Shibuya, a Tokyo district famed for its lively nightlife. Nobody would have guessed this was a gathering for shut-ins, or *hikikomori*, as they're known in Japan.

"Listen up. Rice bowls with roast beef are coming," called out the evening's host, Wataru Kubo, commanding the crowd to chow down.

This is no 12-step meeting. There are no uncomfortable chairs, no stale coffee, no embarrassing public confessions. It's OK if you don't want to share your personal story—or even your name. A sheet posted near the entrance spells out some basic rules of engagement. No. 2 reads: "Nod a lot as you listen.

▼ Entry-level job openings in Japan per college graduate, by graduating year



▲ Kubo in Shibuya district

Don't deny others even if you disagree with them."

Kubo, who started organizing the monthly gatherings in August 2018, wants the ambiance to be as relaxed as possible. He's succeeded: When I showed up wearing a suit and tie, a few people in the casually dressed crowd ribbed me for being so formal. "This is a place where people feel safe," he says. "This is also a place where they can network."

When I introduced myself as a reporter, some at the gathering fell into an awkward silence. But a few agreed to tell me about the unexpected turns that led them to this room. One 47-year-old man confided that he'd spent 17 years holed up in his room at his parents' place after graduating from college. Another, 39, told me he spent years moving from job to job and now lives in a homeless shelter.

"It takes a lot of energy to come here," says Kubo, 59, a business consultant. He recalls that as an adolescent he bridled at the idea that he'd one day be expected to take over his father's carpentry business, but at the same time he felt no pull to go into another profession. After graduating from high school, he became a recluse. Sometimes he would venture into downtown Shibuya at night to people-watch. "There was power in Shibuya with so many young people," he says. "That gave me comfort."

The monthly gatherings have been on hiatus since February because of the pandemic. "I was devastated in March and April," Kubo says when we meet again in July. "I thought, What could we possibly do in a world where people can't get in contact with each other?" He organized an online event in May, he tells me, but it didn't feel intimate. He hoped to resume the monthly meetups this summer at the same restaurant, even if he had to limit the guest list to five. When he messaged me in mid-August, I learned that a resurgence of the virus had derailed his plans.

Shibuya, which was deserted during the seven-week-long state of emergency that ended May 25, doesn't have the same energy it did before the outbreak. It's not just concerns about becoming infected that are keeping the revelers at bay. Japan's economy contracted at an annualized rate of 28% in the April-to-June quarter, the most in the postwar period.

Some major employers, including Japan Airlines Co. and H.I.S. Co., have stopped recruiting college students, while almost 78% of respondents in a midsummer survey of small and midsize businesses by the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry said the pandemic is affecting their hiring of upcoming graduates. Recruit Works Institute polls university students and companies each year to gauge the number of entry-level openings per impending graduate. For the class of 2021, the ratio is set to dip to 1.53 jobs per graduate, from 1.83 this year. "It's like the employment ice age," Kubo says. "It's happening again."

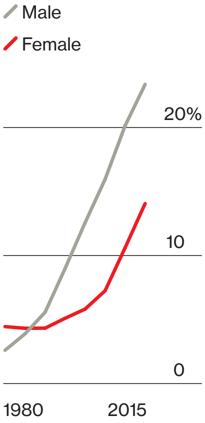
DATA: RECRUIT WORKS INSTITUTE

Retail Therapy

In January, I traveled to Osaka to meet Reiko Katsube, the social worker credited with coining the phrase “8050 problem” to describe the phenomenon in which middle-aged Japanese, usually unemployed and socially withdrawn, live under the same roof as their elderly parents.

We agreed to meet at the offices of the Toyonaka Social Welfare Council, a private organization that works with government agencies and community groups to tackle issues such as elderly abuse and child poverty. The two-story concrete building is tucked into a neighborhood where the streets are narrow and winding and the skyline is filled with crisscrossing power lines. When Katsube arrives she briefly disappears to change into her work outfit: black pants and a navy windbreaker with the council’s name printed on the back. Then she ushers me outside and into the van she uses to make her rounds.

▼ Share of 50-year-olds who have never married



◀ Junko at Bino Marche, the store where she works in Osaka

As she drives, Katsube, who’s been working at the council for more than 30 years, explains that most of her time is spent out of the office, often visiting adult shut-ins living with their parents. Her organization began reaching out to this population in the aftermath of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake (better known abroad as the Kobe earthquake). The disaster killed more than 6,000 people and forced hundreds of thousands from their homes, tearing apart neighborhoods and condemning many to live and die in solitude. “Since the quake, we have been striving to nurture connections in the community to prevent lonely deaths,” Katsube says. “We got to see the problem wasn’t just with senior citizens living alone or only with their spouses.”

We soon arrive at a small store called Bino Marche. Outside, under a red awning, are baskets filled with lotus root, mandarin oranges, and other fruits and vegetables. Inside, shelves are stocked with doughnuts, sodas, honey, and jam.

Katsube, who had a hand in creating the market in 2017 and now manages it, says its purpose is both practical and therapeutic. Bino Marche's customers are mainly senior citizens who can no longer drive or bike and need a local place to do their grocery shopping. Some of the employees are Katsube's social work clients. "They needed a place like this," she says. "So did the community."

Inside the store, I spot a woman serving coffee who's wearing the same navy windbreaker as Katsube's. Katsube introduces us, and the three of us retreat into a meeting room upstairs.

During our interview, the woman, Junko, readily volunteers her age–44–but asks that her last name be withheld because she's concerned about her privacy. Born and raised in the area, she studied illustration at a two-year college and aspired to become a manga artist, in part because she saw that the path to a more conventional career had narrowed during the employment ice age. "People a bit older than us were able to find a job easily, but I was hearing my friends failing after trying about 200 companies," she says.

After graduation, she accepted a part-time job stocking shelves at a grocery store, working early hours so she could spend the rest of the day drawing. When the store shut down, she focused on manga full time, but found she couldn't make a living from it. Over the course of a decade, she worked a series of clerical jobs, all low-paying and involving little training–and consequently offering no prospect for advancement. Sometimes, she quit after just one month.

Job interviews were particularly painful, she recalls. "Every time I was asked the same questions, and I gave the same answers. I got tired of presenting and promoting myself."

Junko says she became more and more withdrawn after turning 30. "I didn't want to deal with people," she says. "I didn't talk with anybody other than my family. I didn't want to think about my circumstances. I lived one day at a time." Concerned, her mother contacted the Toyonaka council, which dispatched Katsube on a home visit.

Junko recalls their first encounter four years ago, acknowledging that the prospect of meeting a stranger to discuss her life and career options held little appeal. She was pleasantly surprised when, after some small talk, Katsube asked her to draw manga for the pamphlets the council distributes. Junko says she kept her poker face, but her heart skipped: "I was pleased a little bit."

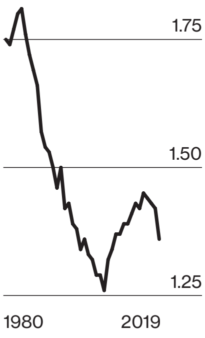
Manga turns out to be an ideal medium for tackling the sensitive subjects the council deals with. Under Katsube's direction, Junko also enrolled in a program that helps shut-ins learn social skills by engaging in activities such as gardening, music, sports, and volunteering. She also took a class in which she learned to design ad flyers on a computer. These helped her rebuild her self-esteem bit by bit. "It taught me I don't need to be afraid of people," she says.

▲ Katsube has years of experience in rehabilitating shut-ins

Junko has been working part time at Bino Marche since 2017, serving coffee, stocking produce, and working the cash register.

After about two hours, Katsube leaves for another appointment, and Junko and I go back downstairs. By now it's mid-afternoon and a group of senior citizens is in the store's kitchen making pork curry and rice to serve to poor children. As the smell of sautéed onions fills the room, Junko tallies the day's sales. When asked how she likes her job at Bino Marche, she struggles for words: "How can I say? It's like I'm being healed there. It's a place where people accept me."

▼ Fertility rate in Japan*



*AVERAGE NUMBER OF LIVE BIRTHS A WOMAN IS PROJECTED TO HAVE IN A LIFETIME. DATA: NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF POPULATION AND SOCIAL SECURITY RESEARCH (LEFT); MINISTRY OF HEALTH, LABOUR AND WELFARE (RIGHT)