Karoshi and Karojisatsu: A Matter of Law or Values?

In October 2017, The Guardian wrote how Miwa Sado from Japan's NHK died from heart failure in 2013, following 159 hours of overtime months before her death. It was only four years later that her death was classified as Karoshi. Meanwhile, 24-year old Matsuri Takahashi killed herself in 2015 after working more than 100 hours overtime, months before her suicide, or better known as Karojisatsu.

According to Wikipedia, Karoshi (overwork death) is "…occupational sudden mortality…major medical causes of Karoshi deaths are heart attacks and stroke due to stress and a starvation diet." While Karojisatsu is defined as people who commit suicide due to mental stressed caused by work. Although Karoshi and Karojisatsu became a big social issue discussed in Japan since the 1980's, this phenomenon dated a long time before the terms even existed.

Hifumi Okunuki wrote in the Japan Times that Tsuneichi Miyamoto's nonfiction book "Cruel Tales of Japan" depicted how the wave of capitalization in Japan prior to the World War II took Japanese workers off their human rights and forced them to work too hard. And when the workers fell ill, they would be laid off, causing many of them to commit suicide or to suffer from mental breakdown.

Gobaiano.com also explained that during the country's reconstruction after the war, once again Japan exposed their countrymen to work extra hard. And it seems, that the trend, continued until today.

What becomes even more concerning is that Karoshi and Karojisatsu do not only occur in Japan. Cases have shown that this trend is not an isolated only in the country where the terms were created. The Strait Times recorded that in 2008-2009, no less than 35 employees of France Telecom or Orange, committed suicide. Many of the victims blamed work stress and decisions made by the management of the company. In 2010, 18 Foxconn workers in China "…attempted suicide…14 of them died." 21-year old Moritz Erhardt who was an intern at Bank of America Merril Lynch in London died on August 15, 2013, after working for 72 hours non-stop. And then there was 24-year old Indonesian Mita Diran who worked as a copy editor at the Young & Rubicam advertising company. Ms. Diran died on December 15, 2013, following weeks of overwork.

And it is believed that there are still cases unrecorded regarding Karoshi or Karojisastu. This trend is so concerning that even global institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) created measures to prevent Karoshi and Karojisatsu; from reducing working hours and excessive work; providing significant medical support and treatment for employees, and to promote dialogue between employees and their employers.

If the measures formatted by the ILO are seen to be a solution, then how come, the measures do not seem to work well in Japan?

Toyota, for example, has "…tried to limit the amount of overtime that is available to workers and they encourage workers to leave at 7 pm… employees fail to record it or choose to take their work home." Mitsubishi UFJ Trust and Banking also offered its workers to leave 3 hours early, and only 34 from 7000 of its employees signed up to do it. Why is this happening?

The Japan Times stated that for centuries, people in Japan have been taught that loyalty "…is the supreme virtue." If before, that loyalty was focused to the Emperor and to the country, nowadays it has been redefined as loyalty to the company that they work for. Aside from loyalty, Takoku McCrann, Ph.D. said in his essay that honor in Japanese culture has been put on a pedestal; so much so that if a person "…lost your honor, you had only one way to preserve it: harakiri…by killing yourself…you were able to sustain your honor and eradicate shame". Japan, in particular, has long embraced its shame culture, whereas the United States and most western countries are more of guilt-cultured countries.

By tracing back the cultures of the two cultures, could we then, prevent Karoshi and Karojisatsu?

Measures taken by the ILO would work more efficiently when applied in other countries, because by

putting a law on how many hours an employee could work, and the obligation to record their overtime, for example, would be able to limit employees from working too much, and would restrict employers from ignoring their employees, since it is finely regulated. Meanwhile, for countries such as Japan, there should be a revolutionary change of views of the definitions of honor and loyalty. There needs to be a shift in looking at suicide as protecting one's honor, and loyalty as working oneself to his or her death. A sociological approach is needed here.

Is this possible though? Is it possible to change the values that have been held on for centuries by a country? Hirai Naofusa's writing at least could serve as a breath of fresh air, since "Japan…has become accustomed to accepting foreign developed cultures. Japanese people have maintained a great interest and curiosity in imported things included religion and science."

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