

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Biased Reporting In Japanese Media Causes Jump In Suicide Rate

Knut Holdhus
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Sayoko Okawa (not her real name) holds her late daughter's smartphone, 22nd June 2024, Saitama Prefecture

Discrimination and Human Rights Violations

Waves of biased reporting by media in Japan after the Abe assassination in 2022 led to several suicides among the youth of religious minority



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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 3: Believers Suffering

Suicides due to biased reporting

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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Nozomi Kojima

According to Nozomi Kojima (28), a representative of the "Association to Protect the Human Rights of Second-Generation Believers", several second-generation individuals have committed suicide since the media coverage of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the Unification Church) became too heated. Kojima points out, "Many second-generation individuals are being hurt without us even realizing it."

Two years ago, Sayoko Okawa (pseudonym), a woman in her 60s living in Saitama Prefecture and a [Family Federation](#) believer, lost her eldest daughter, Megumi (pseudonym, 27 at the time), to suicide. Although no suicide note was left behind, Okawa believes that the intense media coverage of the [religious organization](#) was the cause. She says,

"Criticism of the church probably sounded like slander against her parents, which must have been stressful for her. She was a gentle and sensitive child."

Okawa regrets that due to her activities as a believer, caring for her ailing parents, and running the retail business of books and stationery inherited from her parents, she found it difficult to spend quality time with her family.

When Megumi was in middle school, she began to frequently skip school due to bullying and other issues. After visiting a psychiatric clinic, she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After obtaining her high school diploma, she worked in several jobs, including factory work and as a temporary employee. However, she faced interpersonal and work-related troubles, and in March 2022, she quit her job where she had been employed under a disability quota. Since then, she had been staying at home.

Nevertheless, her relationship with her mother was good, and within the family, they had the "closest relationship where they could talk about anything" (according to Sayoko). They often went to karaoke together. Although Megumi was not a church member, she would participate in church events and seminars when invited and had also visited facilities related to the [Family Federation](#) in South Korea.

However, after the shooting incident involving former Prime Minister Abe, things changed dramatically. As media criticism of the church increased on TV and the internet, her relationship with Megumi began to become strained.



One day, while Okawa was talking with a fellow believer near her home, Megumi suddenly slammed the door shut with a loud "bang!" Such behavior had never happened before, so Okawa was surprised. Megumi also once angrily asked, "How much debt do you have?" Okawa suspects that Megumi's actions and words were influenced by the stories of former believers that were featured in the critical media reports.

On one occasion, Megumi did not return home late at night, and even by morning, she had not come back. Worried, Okawa visited Megumi's friends and eventually, one of them showed her a message Megumi had sent via social media. The message contained words hinting at suicide, saying, "I'm

just so tired."

Okawa spent the entire morning searching for her daughter but couldn't find any trace of her. Just as she was about to file a missing person report, she received news at work that Megumi's body had been found. Okawa, looking down, says,

"Even though we lived together, I couldn't realize how much she had been hurt. I feel so useless and regretful because of that."

In addition to the suicide hints, Megumi's message contained an unfounded belief that her mother was trying to use her as a "cash cow".

According to Okawa, when Megumi was still working, there were a few times when Okawa temporarily borrowed a small amount of money, a few thousand yen, from Megumi to save the time and hassle of going to the bank. She had also encouraged Megumi to find a new job after she quit her previous one. Okawa believes Megumi might have misunderstood these actions. Okawa expresses her frustration, saying,

"The biased media coverage has caused me to lose both the bond with my daughter and her trust."

Recently, Okawa has distanced herself somewhat from the local church due to interpersonal issues, but she remains outraged by the government's request for a dissolution order, calling it "unjust". She fears that if the dissolution order is finalized, even more people will suffer, just like Megumi did.

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Media Causes Family Rifts And Domestic Violence

August 14, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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Strong media bias causes domestic violence and family rifts for members of religious minority in Japan

Tokyo, 14th August 2024 – Published as the **19th article** in a series in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat – Part 3: **Believers Suffering Discrimination and Human Rights Violations**

Family Rifts and Forced Renunciation of Inheritance

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

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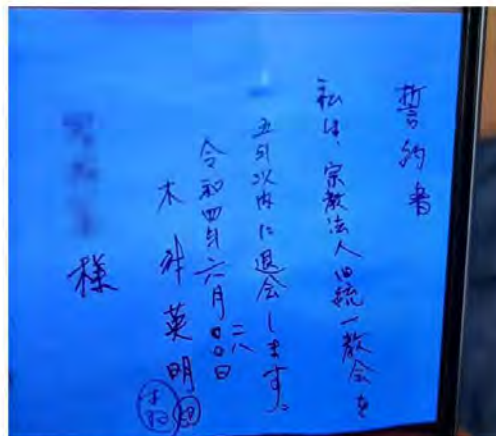
Due to critical reports about the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)), **rifts have deepened between believers and their non-believing family members and relatives**. There have been instances where parents, influenced by the negative reports, have forced their son or daughter to sign documents expressing that he or she intends to renounce the faith.

Hideaki Kimura (木村英明), a 41-years old man who lives in Kumamoto Prefecture, was asked by his father two years ago to sign a paper stating, "I will leave the [church](#) within five years." Reluctantly, he signed his name. While preparing to return to his hometown from Tokyo and considering living with his parents, the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe occurred.

Some of the claims made by his strongly opposed father were not based on facts, but what particularly hurt was being told that he would not act as a "guarantor". To join the company he had secured a job with after returning home, he needed his parents to act as guarantors. However, his father went as far as to say,

"If you don't quit, I'll call the company and tell them not to hire you because you're a member of the [Unification Church](#)."

Seeing this, his mother intervened, saying, **"This is a violation of human rights."** Eventually, the situation was temporarily resolved when Kimura signed a pledge prepared by his father, as a condition for his father to act as a guarantor.



An image of the pledge taken by Hideaki Kimura with his smartphone. Although it says "June", the correct date is "July" according to him. (The photo has been partially edited.) Photo: Hideaki Kimura

There has also been **domestic violence** motivated by religious beliefs. Mitsuyo Adachi (a pseudonym, in her 70s), who lives in the Tokyo metropolitan area, is a believer whose husband opposes the [Family Federation](#). While usually calm, **he becomes irritable and violent towards Adachi whenever he sees critical reports about the [Family Federation](#)**.

Two years ago, and again last year, he assaulted her, saying things like "You've ruined my life!" This resulted in Adachi suffering a fractured rib. However, she did not tell her husband about this and even concealed it at the hospital where she was treated, claiming it was an indoor accident caused by carelessness.

Adachi says,

"Although I fear the violence might worsen, I wanted to forgive rather than hate, so I never brought up the topic of violence."

However, she worries that if the dissolution order for the [Family Federation](#) is confirmed, her husband's opposition might become even more intense.

Some believers have been forced by relatives to renounce their inheritance. Akio Niikura (a pseudonym, in his 50s), living in the Chugoku region, was once nearly abducted and confined by relatives aiming to forcibly de-convert him.

Although the attempt ultimately failed, he continued to maintain steady contact with his parents afterward. When his mother fell ill, it was Niikura's wife who first noticed something was wrong and provided care. She recalls,

"At first, when we visited, we were given a cold reception. But as we continued to persevere, my mother-in-law, while she was still alive, eventually asked my husband a few times if he would consider returning home."

However, due to intense negative media coverage, the attitudes of his relatives, including his father, drastically



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changed. Last year, when Niikura and his wife attended the third anniversary of his mother's passing, his father told him, "If you don't leave the **Family Federation**, we will cut ties with you. You must renounce your inheritance!"



Japanese couple facing relatives. Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 10th August 2024.

Surrounded by relatives, Niikura was pressured into signing a document indicating his intention to forfeit his inheritance.

Niikura expressed his frustration, saying,

"My father blindly believed what was reported on TV about the **Family Federation**. As the eldest son, he feared that I would take over the family home and turn it into a meeting place for the **federation**. He even suspected that there were ulterior motives behind the care my wife provided for my mother."

Niikura's wife also expressed her anger, saying,

"More than being forced to give up the inheritance, what's truly painful is to see the trust we built over decades being shattered and being treated like criminals."

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Featured image above: *Elderly Japanese man becoming angry because of media reports. Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 15th August 2024.*

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