

Female mutual support in Kyoto and Kampala — by Charlotte Hawkins & Laura Haapio-Kirk

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Two of the ASSA fieldsites, Uganda representing the youngest population in the world, and Japan the oldest, have a surprising amount in common when it comes to the experiences of ageing, especially regarding the importance of female mutual support in mid-life and beyond. In this blog post we present how peer-support manifests in both fieldsites and look at how friendship is mediated both face-to-face and via the phone.

In the Uganda fieldsite, researcher Charlotte Hawkins attends the weekly meetings for an NGO for single mothers, many of whom are HIV positive. Here, they receive practical support for school fees, medicines, primary education and exercise training, but many also profess to attend due to the mutual support and belonging offered by the group. This is an excerpt from an interview with the group Director and the Nurse:

Director: They feel they're sisters

Nurse: Being together

M: Unity is good

Director: You have it, get friends, go back free

M: You can't just finish your problems yourself

Director: Talking about problems, you learn that mine is the same... You can be happy when you're sick, even when you know you're going to die.

These gatherings are always loud with laughter, music and dancing, showing how such sisterhood and 'unity' brings these women happiness, despite any problems they may face.



Women enjoying their bi-weekly meeting. Photograph by Charlotte Hawkins

Maggie, a 67-year-old Go-down resident, also feels happy when she discusses her problems with her friend Alice on the phone:

So when I'm tired of sleep, I wake up and pray Lord I call her, because it is 95%, I call her, I say eh Alice how are you... I told myself thank you God it's great to hear from you, how are you? I become so happy, I say now I'm now sick, and Alice says Maggie, if you are to die who am I to talk to, we are only 2? [laughing]

The need to share problems in order to overcome them was also recognised by a woman in the rural Northern Ugandan field-site, who claimed to be over 100 years old. She said that stress comes from thinking too much about what you lack or have lost, which "*can kill you, not only make you go mad*". The way she counters her own stress is by avoiding isolation. If she passes her life-long friends' home (see photograph below) and she finds her door closed, she will always knock and find out why she's indoors. She advises her to not be isolated, "*don't stay alone in the house*", and they share their problems.



Life-long friends. Photograph by Charlotte Hawkins.

In the Japanese case, middle-aged women have also expressed the importance of maintaining a circle of close female friends in order to receive emotional support. Our researcher in Japan, Laura Haapio-Kirk, has found that typically all-female friendship groups are often developed in mother's groups, work places, or hobby groups, and can continue for decades even after the original shared activity has long ceased. Participating in girl's night (*joshikai*) dinners and lunches, Laura has found that such meet-ups are commonplace particularly among middle-aged women. But between meet-ups these women typically stay in touch via the messaging app Line, and for many this can be a much-valued source of support. At one lunch-time meet-up with such a group of friends in Kyoto, Keiko san, aged 62, who works at a catering company and cares for her elderly mother explained:

It's really hard and sad to see your own mother and father deteriorate, especially if they get dementia. It's like a tunnel without an ending. If you speak with your family about important matters, it gets more and more serious, darker. But if I have a particularly hard day with my mother...being able to reach out to someone right at that second when you need them is the best thing about smartphones, and receiving stickers that tell me 'it's okay!!' is great.



Screenshot of Line stickers with messages such as “Goodnight”. Image by Laura Haapio-Kirk.

In contrast with Kampala, in central Kyoto it is typical for neighbours to know each other by sight, but not to spend any real time with each other. Women in particular have emphasised the importance of staying connected through their smartphone to a support network of friends. However, the smartphone is typically seen as a tool for keeping offline friendships going, and for organising offline meetups, rather than having friendships which are purely online: “My smartphone itself is not a cure for loneliness, it is seeing people every day that makes me feel better.” However, as one ages and mobility becomes harder, or when illness strikes, the smartphone can provide a crucial connection to the world, as Megumi san (58) who had been undergoing chemotherapy for six months explained:

Especially while I have been sick, the smartphone has become very important to me. It is my connection to the outside world. The days following chemotherapy my body feels drained and I cannot leave the house. During that time if I receive a Line message or sticker from my friend I feel uplifted.



Drawing by Megumi san: "During treatment, the smartphone connects me to the outside world".
Photograph by Laura Haapio-Kirk.

Whether two women are sitting in a home in Kampala, or in a Kyoto café, the stories being shared are remarkably similar: about husbands who are inept at providing emotional or financial support, or about the latest development in one's health prognosis. In sharing their problems with their friends, these Japanese and Ugandan women are 'up-lifted'. In both Kyoto and Kampala, the laughter, emotional expression and mutual support that comes from face-to-face meet-ups is also possible to recreate over the phone, through morning phone calls or the use of stickers on Line messages; bridging physical distances and mediating offline and online friendship.

Note: This essay is adapted with permission from the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) Blog: <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/assa/2019/01/24/female-mutual-support-in-kyoto-and-kampala-by-charlotte-hawkins-laura-haapio-kirk/>