

## 5

### **Living between Pakistan and Japan: The Struggles of an Area Studies Researcher and a Working Mother**



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From the beginning of June, nurseries and schools have been re-opened in our town. Our kids can enjoy meeting with their friends at playgroups again, and I have been released from taking care of two kids in our tiny home for a while.

My husband and I are both researchers of area studies, both working in the Islamic world. We have a four-year-old and a one-year-old. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, we were often fighting for the chance to go on a field research trip while the other remained home to look after the children. It was one of our biggest problems.

I conduct research on the relationship between religion and nationality in Pakistan. Speaking of religious matters, in the Islamic world, the Juma (Friday's gathering) prayer is recommended for connecting with the community and meeting people. This year, in May, most Islamic countries celebrated the religious festival of Eid al-Fitr by staying home to curb the spread of COVID-19. The Hajj / Pilgrimage was cancelled. Muslims can pray at home by themselves without any incurring any penalty. However, Pakistanis overruled the lockdown and defied mosque restrictions. It is the mosque, not disinfection, that offers Pakistani people greater peace of mind.

In Pakistan, the COVID-19 infection spread rapidly from the end of April, and now the number of infected people in the country has reached 113,702 (June 10). The infection subsided during the summer season, but it is on the rise again in November. There are thousands of people who cannot buy bread for the day if they take leave from work for a day. Many of the poorer workers do not even have a bank account for saving money. Prime Minister Imran Khan said the implications of a strict lockdown were different for those living in slums and the people living in affluent areas. The mosques and the community itself sometimes help to save these poor people in Pakistan where the economic and social welfare system are weak.

My friends living in Pakistan tell me about the ongoing situation in the country through SNS. I met most of them during my time studying in Karachi, or in my field research in Lahore. Like me, they have also graduated from university, got a job, got married, and are busy raising their children now. "...There is not enough food stuff in the market because of the lockdown, schools are closed, we cannot take the children outside, there is no more cooking for the Iftar dinner, our husbands cannot afford shopping for our family...". Yet these are scholars who usually discuss academic issues with me.

In our family in Japan, the situation during the lockdown was almost the same. There is a small reading room for research in our house, with only computers and bookshelves. When the playgroups were closed out of self-restraint, and the university campus was off-limits at the same time, all the family were shut in the house the entire day. This is how the fight for the reading room began between I and my husband.

If you lose the reading room competition, you have to look after the children while going through the valuable treatises in the living room. By tacit agreement, one can occupy the reading room when one has an online class or a web conference, or a deadline for finishing papers. In our case, my husband won frequently since he has more meetings and classes, and so today I am writing this essay on the dining table.

As at other universities, I have started giving lectures online due to the Coronavirus, but it is as clear as day that you cannot do your academic work while caring for two infants indoors. One of my friends who is also a researcher at the university, hires a babysitter during her online class at her own expense. I decided to do my own work at midnight after putting my children to bed.

I would like to show the result of these two months; I might have read more illustrated dinosaur encyclopedias than academic papers. There is a Spinosaurus doll on the study book I was thinking of reading if my children took a nap. No longer does anyone keep it in mind that it is forbidden for kids to enter the reading room, and there is Origami confetti thrown all over the floor. The search history of Google on my laptop is filled with the Triceratops variants. Yes, I really learned how to tell the Chasmosaurus from the Styracosaurus.

Now the government has lifted the state of emergency, and I have been released from learning about dinosaurs. Our next concern is when we can travel to do our research in the field. For researchers who are raising children, the fear of the constraints of schools is especially keen because they said, "if a parent goes abroad on a business trip, their child is prohibited from going to school for two weeks" as a measure to prevent COVID-19 infection.

On the other hand, some good systems have been introduced during this stay-at-home period. Many workshops and seminars have switched to web meetings. I can play with kids till just before launching the video conference app Zoom. I mute my microphone during the meeting, so that voice of a child will not disturb other participants. This is an epoch-making method for researchers with children to take part in seminars. The human species, at least some researchers in Japan, ache for this system to take root even in a post-corona era.

### **Author's Profile**

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