

Steady fall in suicides offers glimmer of hope in Japan

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bad news.

The number of suicides in Japan jumped sharply in 1998 to more than 30,000 and remained at that very elevated level for more than a decade. It was a year when Japan's economy fell into recession, and bankruptcies and unemployment soared. The suicide rate rose to about 26 per 100,000 people.

The only silver lining was that suicides didn't increase again after a deep recession in 2008-2009. Then in 2010, the decline started and has been steady ever since, bringing the number back to pre-1998 levels.

A closer look at the data shows that the main factors driving both the rise to more than 30,000 and the drop back to close to 20,000 were health issues and financial problems. The decline has been the sharpest for people between 50 and 59 years old.

Experts say the steps taken since 2006 have been effective in addressing the socio-economic problems common among middle-aged men. Prevention efforts are shifting their focus to the elderly and young, whose suicide rates have not come down as much.

Even with the decline, Japan's suicide rate of 17.3 per 100,000 people in 2016 remains high compared to most other countries. The U.S. suicide rate is around 13 per 100,000, and the United Kingdom is under 10.

Shimizu said Japan should aim to get the number of suicides down to between 14,000 and 15,000 per year.

The still-high suicide rate means Japan is a difficult place to live, a society that is not kind to troubled people, said Dr. Yutaka Motohashi, head of the government-funded Japan Support Center for Suicide Countermeasures.

"Suicide prevention is not a job for experts and special people supporting the cause, but it's for everyone," he said. "We can be a little kinder and try to reach out to others."

First Afghan women's orchestra tries to change attitudes

By Karim Sharifi and Rahim Faiez
The Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghanistan's first — and only — all-female symphony is trying to change attitudes in a deeply conservative country where many see music as immoral, especially for women.

The symphony's two conductors show how difficult that can be, but also how satisfying success is.

One of them, Negin Kholwak, was supported by her father when she joined the Afghanistan National Institute of Music and then became part of its girls' orchestra, called Zohra. But the rest of her family was deeply against it. Her uncles cut off ties with her father.

"They told him he is not their brother anymore," said Kholwak, now 20. "Even my grandmother disowned my father."

Kholwak had learned about the music institute at the orphanage in Kabul where she spent most of her life. Her father sent her to the orphanage because he was afraid for her safety in their home province of Kunar in eastern Afghanistan, an area where Taliban militants are active.

The institute is one of the only schools in Afghanistan where girls and boys share classrooms, and it draws its students from the ranks of orphanages and street children, giving them a chance at a new life. Kholwak studied piano and drums before becoming the orchestra's conductor.

More than 30 girls between 12 and 20 years



ORCHESTRATING ATTITUDES. Orchestra conductor Negin Kholwak, center, rehearses with Afghanistan's first all-female symphony in Kabul. The musicians are trying to change attitudes in a deeply conservative country where many see music as immoral, especially for women. (AP Photo/Rahmat Gul)

old play in Zohra, which is named after a goddess of music in Persian literature. In January, the orchestra, which performs traditional Afghan and western classical music, had its first international tour, appearing at the World Economic Forum in Davos and four other cities in Switzerland and Germany.

"The formation of the orchestra is aimed at sending a positive message to the community, to send a positive message to the girls, to encourage families and girls to join the music scene of the country," said Ahmad Naser Sarmast, the institute's founder and director.

Sarmast has experienced firsthand the militants' hatred of music. In 2014, a Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up at a concert Sarmast was attending. He was wounded and a German man in the audience died.

The Zohra orchestra was created in 2014 when one of the institute's students, a girl named Meena, asked Sarmast if there could be a group where girls could play together. Sarmast leapt at the idea.

Since then, Meena has disappeared. Last year, the seventh grader told the school she had to attend her sister's wedding in her family's village in eastern Nangarhar province. She never returned, a sign of how tenuous people's situation is in a country where war rages, communications are poor, and poverty is rife. Sarmast said the school has not been in contact with her, but he's hopeful she'll return to the school and Zohra.

The orchestra's other conductor, 18-year-old Zarifa Adiba, faced resistance from her family
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