# Service industry takes stand against customer abuse in 'polite' Japan

TOKYO (Kyodo) -- The Japanese are often said to be well-regarded for their etiquette and social graces.

But if this is especially true for those working in Japan's service industry, the same cannot always be said of their customers.

Famously referred to as "gods" by the firms that serve them, some shoppers are seemingly taking advantage of their exalted status by making unreasonable demands that blur the line between legitimate complaints and outright abuse.

But because what constitutes customer harassment is not defined by law in Japan, some have argued that it is difficult to set boundaries between a legitimate claim that could lead to improved service and those that cross the line.

Nonetheless, there has been a spike in cases of customers using abusive language, making threats and excessive demands and unfairly blaming workers for problems they find with products or services.

Employees have even accused some customers of trolling them on social media, or in rare cases, demanding they perform "dogeza" -- kneeling in a prostrate position before the customer and bowing one's forehead to the floor in submission.

Uncommon today, the practice is meant to show deference or deep apology to a person of higher status, and was, for instance, regularly performed by peasants when noblemen passed them on the street in feudal times.

Although customer abuse has been tolerated because of the difficulty of determining the validity of harassment claims, there have been cases in which employees have suffered mentally or physically to the point where they have quit their jobs.

In extreme cases, they have even developed mental illnesses or been driven to suicide.

There are now growing calls for companies to take a strong stance in dealing with abusive customers, and moves are underway by major retailers and food service companies to develop manuals and in-house training programs to clarify how to go about it.

In one instance, a middle-aged woman purchased several sushi packs at a Tokyo department store but complained of not getting enough of the complimentary soy sauce and wasabi Japanese horseradish plastic pouch condiments that are usually included.

Showing the receipt for her purchase to a part-time worker in her 60s, the shopper demanded a full refund.

The department store complied with the shopper's demand and had the part-time staffing agency who supplied the worker refund the woman's money, calling the claim "the responsibility of the sales floor."

Outraged, the part-time staffer said the department store "probably listened to what the customer had to say because it was no big loss for them, but the decision only helps promote customer harassment."

The central government is discussing strengthening measures to require employers to protect employees from abusive customers.

Last month, the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly approved a customer harassment ordinance to prevent customers from abusing workers in a first for Japan.

Coming into effect in April 2025, the ordinance outlines the responsibilities of shoppers when visiting stores, but there are no penalties if it is violated.

The ordinance also opposes unfairly infringing on customer rights since legitimate feedback can help improve business operations. The Tokyo government plans to create guidelines that specify behavior that constitutes customer abuse.

While the ordinance is an important step, the attitude of companies is also being called into question.

"I think companies that retain a corporate culture of the 'customers are gods' will find it very difficult (to take a firm stance against customers)," the part-time staffer added.

But there are companies that have begun seriously tackling the problem.

Supermarket chain Ito-Yokado Co. created a manual for dealing with difficult customers earlier this year while holding in-house seminars for employees to share countermeasures such as "reporting violent or abusive behavior to the police" and "responding to customers in places where they can be viewed on security cameras to record evidence."

"Many of our employees work for us because they enjoy customer service. We must avoid causing them emotional distress and preventing them from doing the work they love," said an Ito-Yokado official.

The reality is stark. According to a survey by Rengo, Japan's largest national trade union center, nearly 40 percent of workers who have experienced customer harassment said they felt depressed about going to work while a little over 10 percent reported quitting or changing jobs because of it.

In July, Takashimaya Co. became the first Japanese department store to announce its basic policy on its website, listing specific instances that fall into the category of customer harassment. It also said there are cases in which customers who violate the rules may be asked to leave the store.

Satoshi Yamauchi, manager of the Takashimaya Nihonbashi store in Tokyo, welcomed the announcement, saying, "It is difficult to draw a line for harassment because of the customer justifications that may be pointed out, but these guidelines will serve as a yardstick."

He patrols the sales floor and is in charge of handling disputes between employees and customers. According to Yamauchi, inexperienced store clerks are more likely to become flustered because they cannot draw the line on their own.

He says not only are the employees and the company hurt by such abusive behavior, but it also negatively impacts other customers who witness the incidents when visiting the store.

In September, Seven-Eleven Japan Co., the largest convenience store chain in Japan, decided to release to the public its internal customer harassment guidelines adopted in 2022. The company gave examples of abusive conduct, stating it would take "firm action" against it.

And FamilyMart Co., another major convenience store chain, began displaying anti-customer abuse posters at its stores in October.

Kaname Murasaki, head of the Japan Harassment Association, says many companies have created a climate in which they are unable to refuse unreasonable demands because they have assumed an excessively subservient attitude toward customers until now.

"Moving forward, companies will be socially unacceptable if they have a don't-rock-the-boat attitude and show preference to customers with unreasonable demands over their own employees," he said.

In the midst of Japan's labor shortage, Murasaki stressed the importance of dealing with customer abuse -- a serious cause of employee turnover -- to make companies more attractive to workers.

Customer harassment is defined as any demand that goes beyond the scope of appropriate service, says Kyoko Shimada, representative of the Customer Harassment Association, Prevention and Support.

"Employees and consumers must first recognize (harassment) and have a shared understanding of what it is," she said.

Some 80 companies that provide services in the "ground handling" industry at airports have joined hands to hammer out countermeasures against customer harassment, Shimada says.

She points out that if the industry as a whole embarks on these measures, it will be more effective in getting consumers to understand what constitutes appropriate customer behavior.

On the other hand, some companies in the food service industry are hesitant to take action due to concerns over problematic waitstaff and the difficulty of gathering customer feedback. Others are taking a wait-and-see approach to how the legislation plays out.