



The rise and fall of mothers' and womens' voices in Japan after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011

Provocation

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Children in downtown Tokyo, Photo credit: Bronwyn Hayward

In his Olympic speech on 7th September 2013, Shinzo Abe, the Prime Minister of Japan, stated: “the [Fukushima] situation is under control”. Tokyo’s proud declaration of hosting the Olympics in 2020 was intended to show a fast and efficient recovery from Japan’s triple disasters of 11th March, 2011 – earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident. Through hosting several international events, the current government apparently hopes to demonstrate to the world the extent of Japan’s full recovery and ‘strength’. Yet this recovery and strength still throw shadows on the country’s people, especially those in Fukushima.

The Fukushima accident has shaken Japan in unparalleled ways and new features have emerged in its political and social landscape. One of these new features was the rapid rise of a women’s collective movement against radioactive contamination after the disaster. The movement rose quickly through the internet. In December 2011, *The Guardian* newspaper declared: “(m)others are at the forefront of various grassroots movements that are working together to stop the operation of all nuclear plants in Japan...”¹ But today, five years on, this remarkable movement of grassroots energy is at risk of disappearing as quickly as it arose. Why?

¹ Kakuchi, S. (2011) ‘Japanese mothers rise up against nuclear power’, *The Guardian*, 22 December 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/dec/22/japanese-mothers-rise-nuclear-power>

Traditionally, Japan is well-known as a male-oriented society.² There are many complex historical and social reasons why this is the case. Several practical barriers to women's advancement help explain why men have such influence in Japan's political and public life, particularly in predominantly rural areas like the Fukushima prefecture of the Tōhoku region of Japan. One of these is a lack of job opportunities. Women in Tōhoku find it much harder to find jobs to support themselves, so they tend to depend on men who can earn much more. Tōhoku's harsh climate has also reinforced a traditional emphasis on strong male leadership as key for survival especially in a region where farming is the main local industry.³ Women in Japan and Tōhoku in particular, therefore often place a virtue on obedience and quiet presence. Roles and expectations are that men literally feed their families.⁴ Women in the Fukushima prefecture have long been aware of these wider, dominant Tohoku social attitudes. However, the Fukushima accident ironically helped empower some women to stand up for themselves and take action.

Soon after major damage to the Fukushima Daiichi plant, the Government declared an evacuation zone on 11th March 2011 because of possible radiation contamination. Although the then Chief Cabinet Secretary repeatedly explained that, "there is no immediate effect on health", mothers in Fukushima decided to leave the area with their children to protect them from radiation, regardless of if they were inside or outside the zone. Many of them fled without their husbands who were often critical of their actions.⁵ What these mothers did went well beyond their usual expectations and demonstrations of 'obedient' feminine attitudes.

Initially, many of these women were isolated. They had to find useful information for their self-evacuation alone. But very soon many mothers started gathering to exchange information through internet tools, mainly Twitter and Facebook.⁶ This networking has quickly grown into a collective movement. The National Parents Network to Protect Children from Radiation was born as a result. There are two main aims of this network. The first is to obtain factual information about radiation contamination from the Fukushima accident, which was often hidden by panic-stricken authorities. The second is to ensure wider Japanese society and the Government hear their fears about radiation, and their needs when carrying out their own evacuation to protect children from radiation. The network took actions mainly on the internet but also through hosting symposiums, workshops and gathering petitions around the country. Initially many media outlets covered their stories, and their voices started to be heard. However, as quickly as mothers' voices rose, they were lowered, despite the fact that the Fukushima accident has only been 'under control' but not fully resolved.

My own research, and that of colleagues, has not fully analysed all the reasons yet, but there are some possible explanations for this silencing. Social and family pressures on mothers are among them. From the very start, the mothers' movement was made fun of by magazines, tabloids and on the internet, as 'group hysteria', or 'women's typical hysteria'. Some commentators even said "their brains must have been radioactively contaminated to do such stupid things as running away leaving their husbands behind". The women were even called unpatriotic for speaking loudly of high-tech Japan's failure in having one of the worst nuclear accidents in history.⁷ These criticisms have scared many women who are socialized in this largely rural community to value the tradition of obedience

² Tamami Kadata (2015) *Danson Jyohi to iu Yamai (A disease called sexist in the Japanese society)*, Gentoosya.

³ Yukiko Nagano (2005) *Gendai Nooson ni okeru 'ie' to Jyosei (Family system and women in contemporary farming villages)*, Tosui Shobo.

⁴ Nagano, *ibid.*

⁵ Mrs Pumpkin (2015), Genpatsu wo megutte bekkyo, tsui ni rikon wo semarareta (Having lived apart because of the Fukushima accidents and now my husband wants a divorce), Toyo Keizai Online, <http://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/79131>, accessed on 20 March 2016.

⁶ There are many Twitters and Facebooks on this matter. Examples are, "#Fukushima Daiichi Genpatsu", "The Sorrow of Living in Fukushima" on Twitter and Kodomo Zenkoku Net on Facebook.

⁷ There are several internet sites which show this type of comments. One example is so called 2 channel, which is an anonymous bulletin internet board <http://hayabusa6.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/tomorrow/1312971837/>, accessed on 27 March 2016.

and quiet.⁸ Resistance and fear among Japanese women hindered some networking activities.

Many women also found their own families criticised their self-evacuation and the wider mass movement. Many women in Fukushima had fled without their husbands who were often less than understanding of their fears. They share common experiences of receiving comments from their husbands, and sometimes in-laws, such as “you’d be seen as selfish and traitors for abandoning local communities” or “you’d lose our (‘husbands’ and ‘in-laws’) face for having runaways in the family.” In my own interviews with women I found some self-evacuee mothers were often begged to come home. Some were even threatened with divorce if they did not return.⁹ It is not easy for women in Japan to make sufficient income to support themselves, let alone raise children single-handedly. A lot of mothers I interviewed, who spoke up after the accident, have since decided to return home, though still holding strong fears of the radioactive contamination.

With these social and family pressures put on them, an emerging women’s movement arising in the aftermath of Fukushima is now growing quiet. Many women say they are returning home and withdrawing. In other words, their social vulnerability is making their once-raised voices unheard again. Women in Fukushima stood up for themselves and for their children at all cost. They even built their online platforms to reach society through the power of collective voice and action. But once again their voices are being silenced under strong social pressures, perhaps most surprisingly, from their own families.

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⁸ Nagano, *ibid.*

⁹ The author’s personal interview with an anonymous women 6 June, 2012.