

Fukushima women against nuclear power: finding a voice from Tohoku

Saturday 10 March 2012, by [SLATER David H.](#) (Date first published: 9 November 2011).

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Introduction by David H. Slater

From the very first, it has been quite difficult to politicize earthquake and tsunami hit Tohoku, despite the poor planning, the slow and uneven response, the failure to provide aid in a timely way in the days and weeks afterward, and the often poorly organized evacuation centers—an issue which resulted in a number of unexplained deaths. Now, the temporary housing facilities virtually insure that communities, or what is left of them, will stay dysfunctional for a while, even as their residents are often the ones called upon to manage their own relief. While the silences of fatalism and the shock of such a terrible disaster have been noted, anyone who has been to the Northeast on a regular basis is aware that the frustration and anger erupt in different ways almost every day. The point, however, is that rarely does it emerge in the unified voices of protest, rarely in coherent demands for systematic help, almost never in anger expressed in a way that the rest of the nation can hear.

In contrast, the threat of nuclear radiation and critiques of the nuclear industry have been skillfully politicized in ways that have led to the largest set of demonstrations in Japan (with the exception of Okinawa) since the US-Japan security treaty protests of the 1960s and 1970s. These protests have been based in Tokyo, utilizing urban networks of activists who have provided the digital framework for organization that has brought together an older generation of anti-nuclear activists, young families, hip urbanites, office workers and union protesters. This is, perhaps ironic, considering that many of the protesters and marchers rarely have contact with Tohoku. The nuclear threat, organizers say, extends beyond Tohoku, even beyond Japan. And indeed, this is the message that has been heard around the world, as the anti-nuke protest and politics were staged with specific reference to Fukushima (sadly, rarely with respect to the wider 'Tohoku' region).

Bridging voices

Women, and in particular, mothers, have been quite active in radiation measurement, calls for contaminated soil removal, and efforts to secure safe food since the early months of the crisis. Today, perhaps more than any other group, they have emerged as particularly effective anti-nuke spokespersons. Of course, there is nothing new in women being at the front of social shifts, as seen in work as diverse as Sheldon Garon's *Molding Japanese Minds* and Robin LeBlanc's *Bicycle Citizens* illustrate.

The movement of “Women from Fukushima Against Nukes” (Genptasu iranai Fukushima kara no onnatachi”) is positioned to express a range of issues that respond to and exploit this particular position. The logic of political potency, now as then, relies on the privileged position of women as the core of Japanese society and polity. The eternal maternal role of producer and reproducer of Japanese society and culture has taken an even sharper edge in this age of demographic decline. Today, women as mothers are charged with a more specific and often overtly political task: to do their job of having and nurturing babies to maintain the dwindling population (usually, while also doing part-time jobs). Secondly, we hear of women in their role as wives, supporters of their husbands, who are off working, not marching. These shifts have positioned woman with an even stronger foundation from which to speak, at least on some nuclear issues. DS

In many of these protests, it is as mothers that women speak out against corporate interests and government policy. They speak as they protect their children, their families; in this capacity, they are forced but also entitled to protest nuclear threats. They have been charged with something more fundamental than capital accumulation, more important than the postwar protection of corporate health. Feeding children healthy food is more important than feeding the energy demands of a hungry urban popular. In this respect, they are unlike other protesters (compare the stalled anti-poverty movement of the last five years and the “Occupy Tokyo” groups of the last few weeks) who must position themselves outside of society and culture in order to critique politics, running the risk of charges of selfishness when they are expected to suffer in silence. Mothers protesting nuclear contamination (and thus the nuclear power industry) critique politics from within, at the core of public perceptions of Japanese society and culture, and indeed, from the perspective of the ‘natural’ obligation of reproduction and nurturing another generation. They cannot suffer in silence; they cannot accept some collateral damage as inevitable; to do so would be irresponsible to their children’s and to Japan’s future.

This broad appeal of Fukushima woman as a symbol has provided common ground across often divided constituencies. As mothers and wives, they are not a threat to men. From Tohoku, they are not pitting a rural backwater provider of energy against a voracious urban consumer. The vaguely NIMBY-odor from the early anti-nuke protests, coming from urban protestors who were more intent on marching and chanting than on conducting relief work in Tokoku, is also at least obscured for the time being; the women’s demands begin with the most immediate concerns—safe food, air and play areas for their children—such that opposition to nuclear industry is repositioned as means to that end (rather than the much more abstract fear of an urban population sitting at some remove from Fukushima).

Emotional Response

Women, unlike men, are able to address another range of issues through the recognition and demonstration of the high emotions that confront us all, but is rarely expressed in polite company and serious discourse. Remember when DPJ Economics Minister Kaieda Banri began to cry, on TV? Rather understandable from the pressure and confusion of the moment, as the scope of the tragedy was revealed, and the frustrations of not being able to respond appropriately to it mounted. And yet, there was an outpouring of negative reaction to this performance. Men should not cry, particularly not those in leadership positions. But women who are caught in interviews and on camera addressing governmental or corporate groups are often crying or on the verge of crying. They are doing what their male counter-parts cannot, and when they do it, it means different things. We see the fear (of the nuclear threat), frustration (at the lack of government and corporate cooperation) and exhaustion (from living with uncertainty) as the immediate response to their being mothers, to mothering under intolerable conditions. Note that it is beside the point to try to privilege the

“expressive” function of tears against their “instrumental” function, making one more or less authentic and significant. The point is that these are both, at once, authentic, and it is this unity that makes them so powerful. It also transforms the expressions of anger—the politically correct emotional response to injustice—into something that is grounded in a woman’s body, in a family, in a community, and maybe, for these reasons, all the more accessible for a nation. It transforms individual anger into collective sentiment that viewers from all over Japan and beyond can feel, can identify with, and can share as the basis of a platform for collective action.

Women’s Protests in Action

The ongoing Fukushima disaster has brought attention to earlier studies showing that women and children face a much greater risk of radiation-induced cancer than men [\[1\]](#).

According to a US National Academy of Sciences study of 2006, the threat to women of radiation-induced cancer is 50% higher than that for men. The results were identical both at legally permitted levels of exposure and at ten times higher levels. Infants and unborn children of either gender are at higher risk than either men or women.

As the NIRS report notes, the differential risk is not limited to cancer. “Radiation harm includes not only cancer and leukemia, but reduced immunity and also reduced fertility, increases in other diseases including heart disease, birth defects including heart defects, other mutations (both heritable and not). When damage is catastrophic to a developing embryo spontaneous abortion or miscarriage of a pregnancy may result.”

While anti-nuclear protests held since April have brought together a cross-section of Japanese citizens to oppose nuclear power and helped to sway public opinion – a June public opinion poll indicated that over 80% of Japanese favored at least a gradual phase-out [\[2\]](#) – some of the most consistent and specific demands have come from women’s groups which work to draw attention to issues such as the exposure of children to radiation as well as food safety.

Women’s groups have been particularly scathing and effective in condemning the government’s casualization of exposure – the increase of the permissible exposure rate from 1 to 20 mSv, its inadequate attention to “hotspots” outside of the official evacuation areas, its calculation only of external radiation while ignoring internal radiation, and its spotty food supply oversight.

Sato Sachiko, a 53 year old Fukushima farmer and mother of four is one example of a local woman who has worked tirelessly to get the message out [\[3\]](#). She reports, “I was able to evacuate my four children out of Fukushima. However, for economic reasons or because of job circumstances and things like that there are lots of people who say ‘I want to evacuate but just can’t.’ There are many places in Fukushima City such as the Oonami and Watari areas where high levels of radiation are being detected. If they don’t give immediate support to those who wish to evacuate, children, who are the most vulnerable to radiation, will suffer more and more exposure.” There are indeed areas of Fukushima City beyond the official 20 kilometer evacuation zones where radiation levels exceed those of Minami Soma and other localities directly adjacent to the stricken Fukushima Daiichi plant. Women like Sato have campaigned tirelessly to ensure that more are aware of these blindspots in the official stance and to pressure the state to accept responsibility for the safety of children..

Female protest leaders have helped to maintain the momentum of the September 19 protest in Tokyo that attracted 60,000. Hundreds of women, many of them from Fukushima, organized a sit-in protest at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry from October 30-November 5 [\[4\]](#)

They call on the government to evacuate children from areas with consistently elevated radiation levels. The group includes women who have long participated in protest against the Fukushima TEPCO plants and many others who have come forward recently. Now, in the wake of 3.11, they have a chance to have their views aired nationwide. Greenpeace has reported on their efforts in a blog entry and has posted a video of the demonstration [5].

The September 19 Tokyo protest also expanded to include a march on TEPCO [6].

Supporting protests were organized in other areas such as Osaka, Sapporo, Hiroshima, and other major cities, indicating the national scope of the movement.

As this video of the discussions leading up to the sit-in movement of October 30-November 5 demonstrates, female protestors are not speaking only as mothers or grandmothers. They are engaging in meta-level discussion about Japan's energy future [7], the role of energy alternatives in post-disaster reconstruction, and similarly broad themes at a time when Japan's energy policies are under critical review [8].

Fukushima has been the focus of the crisis, but as many reports have documented, radiation dispersion is difficult to predict and certainly does not stop at prefectural or even national boundaries. The need for wide-scale and multifarious testing and measurement seems obvious, but there has been resistance. In Ibaraki Prefecture, one of the regions outside of Fukushima that has seen the highest spikes in radiation level, for example, despite a statement by Health and Welfare Minister Komiyama Yoko that a system of health checks for children should be put in place, the prefecture has called this "unnecessary" because radiation "is at a very low level compared to Fukushima."

While this may be true, it fits with a tendency since March on the part of both central and local governments to label low rates of exposure "safe" that has outraged many members of the public, and particularly mothers in the effected regions. Ibaraki mothers are now stepping up their calls for comprehensive health checks for their children. Whether participating in protests in Tokyo or demanding testing and accountability at the local level, Japanese women have been a powerful presence in post 3.11 civil society.

David H. Slater

Comments

Mariko

"No More Hibakusha, No More Nuke Plants" Time: 2011 Nov 15 15:00 - 16:00 <http://www.fccj.or.jp/>
Speakers Shuntaro Hida, Physician & Hiroshima A bomb Hibakusha; Matashichi Oishi, Hibakusha, Former Lucky Dragon Crew; Sachiko Sato, Representative, Fukushima Network for Saving Children from Radiation; Mari Takenouchi, Co-director, Society of Hibakusha; Ryusuke Umeda, Former Power Plant Worker
Language: The speech and Q & A will be in English & Japanese with English interpretation
Description: "No More Hibakusha, No More Nuke Plants" The atomic bombings of 1945 killed roughly 200,000 immediately and exposed tens of thousands to radiation that continues to cause health problems. In 1954, a United States nuclear test on Bikini Atoll showered radiation on unsuspecting fishermen, including those working on the famous Lucky Dragon boat. Some 400,000

people have worked at Japan's nuclear power plants with more than 30 of those having asked for compensation for radiation-related illnesses. And now, of course, in Fukushima Prefecture and other areas, millions more are joining the ranks of "hibakusha," or those exposed to radiation. A number of citizen's groups representing "hibakusha" have come together to declare that humanity cannot co-exist with nuclear technology, whether it is used for military or civilian purposes. They are demanding the Japanese government immediately evacuate residents, especially children, from all areas contaminated with radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, halt the distribution of contaminated food and stop moving contaminated debris to other parts of the country. At this Press Conference, group representatives will explain their reasoning and their demands. Please reserve in advance, still & TV cameras inclusive. Reservations and cancellations are not complete without confirmation. Professional Activities Committee Posted by Hyon Suk Chung on Wed, 2011-11-02 18:18 posted in: PAC Copyright 2006, The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.

P.S.

* Japan Focus. Nov. 09, 2011:

<http://japanfocus.org/events/view/117>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.nirs.org/radiation/radhealth/radiationwomen.pdf>

[2] <http://www.afpbb.com/article/life-culture/life/2807327/7388009>

[3] <http://nikkan-spa.jp/69339>. See also on ESSF (article 24518), ["From Fukushima We Change the World"](#).

[4] Poster here: http://d.hatena.ne.jp/onna_suwarikomi/20111020/1319087481

[5] See http://d.hatena.ne.jp/onna_suwarikomi/20111020/1319087481

[6] http://www.47news.jp/news/2011/10/post_20111029174701.html

[7] http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/18140229#utm_campaign%3dsynclickback%26source%3dhttp%3a//blog.livedoor.jp/amenohimoharenohimo/archives/65772087.html%26medium%3d18140229

[8] <http://japanfocus.org/-Andrew-DeWit/3645>