

# **Gender and Disaster: Women, Civil Society, and Democracy in Japan After 3.11**

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Abstract:

Since 3.11, there has been a resurgence of political activism among women. Activists, NPOs (non-profit organizations), NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and voluntary organizations help women manage needs related to the disasters and prolonged relocation. These organizations provide services and create spaces for women's empowerment and care. Yet by finding solutions outside of the political system, the gap between civil society—where women are active and engaged—and Japan's political institutions has deepened, further marginalizing women from the political process. This paper analyzes the changes in Japan's political landscape, which have relegated women to the third sector, and their implications for women's equality and democracy in Japan.

**Key Words:** 3.11, NPOs, NGOs, civil society, gender and disaster, volunteers, transnational networks, religious organizations, and women's activism.

*“When people see voluntary actions as an alternative to politics, they will consider individual actions to be solutions to social issues without seeking changes required in the system.” (Walker 2002).*

The United Nations, World Economic Forum, Inter-parliamentary Union, and OECD rank Japan near the bottom of its rankings because of its gender inequalities. This global pressure to do more and the domestic pressures on the government to bring more women into the labor force because of its rapidly aging society and shrinking population resulted in various national level responses. Most recently, the Abe government’s womenomics agenda sets targets of 30% women’s representation across all levels of its government, ministries, and industries and fields dominated by men. Yet, the national level initiatives and targets do not go to the heart of the problem of Japan’s gender inequalities and fail to address the deeply embedded institutional structures and cultural values that have relegated women and their political participation to civil society.

Much of political science scholarship focuses on national level actors, elections, and processes, which can result in the systematic exclusion of women. The Triple Disasters of 3.11 have created an important moment in Japanese politics and for Japanese women. This tragic crisis stimulated a wave of women’s activism and a revitalization of Japan’s civil society, and culminated in the joining of these women into the mass demonstrations against the Abe government’s security bills during the summer and fall of 2015.

The increasing shift to the right, the neoliberal orientation of the government, and the centralizing reforms of the 1990s, helped to create a new political environment that made it harder for feminist activists and their allies to penetrate the policy process. This

marginalization of the opposition and more left parties has resulted in the growing presence of women and others in Japan's streets—protesting and demanding greater representation and inclusion in the democratic process. Without a voice and representation in the policy process and institutions, the opposition has moved to the streets, and women's activism has been a dynamic part of this civil action.

The recent revitalization of civil society in Japan after the triple disasters of 3.11 brought the political participation of women front and center. Once again, mothers have appeared in our news streams as vocal advocates for their children and families, demanding information and improvising solutions to meet their families' urgent needs. The nuclear power plant meltdown also galvanized the environmental movement against Japan's reliance upon nuclear energy, and many mothers have been visible and vocal in demonstrations. Women have leveraged their roles as mothers to bargain with local and national governments, implementing food-labeling systems and independent tracking of radiation levels in their neighborhoods. Women have also created webs of social networks for transferring and accessing knowledge, building communities on line and on the ground for education and self-empowerment.

The goal of this paper is to examine how and why women's participation is segregated into civil society in Japan, and how this creates both opportunities and barriers for their political activation and mobilization. There is agency and action by women at the community level; yet, how can this dynamism and energy be translated into Japan's most powerful political institutions? What are the implications for Japan's democracy and gender equality if women are segregated into and dominate civil society while still facing such barriers to entry in the most important centers of power at the national level?

Women's activism post-3.11 reminds students and scholars of Japan to revisit questions

about citizenship, representation, and participation in democracy. The broader transformations of the political system and landscape have contributed to widening the gap between women and Japan's party politics and policy process.

The absence of women in national institutions and the current government's ambitious targets through its "womenomics" agenda obscure the dedicated and determined efforts of women at the grassroots level. This article also brings greater attention to actors and organizations that are vital to women's political awareness, education, and activism at the local level: NGOs, NPOs, and many volunteer associations, including religious organizations. The segregation of women's political engagement in civil society has serious implications for Japan's democracy. The media and academia have not paid much attention to the role of these voluntary associations, especially the religious ones, but these organizations are key sites for creating awareness and mobilizing women in the public sphere. There is greater appreciation for such organizations now because of their response to the disasters, but they deserve more credit for the ongoing work they are doing post-disaster to help rebuild communities many years later. These organizations, especially religious organizations were in these communities long before 3.11. 3.11 prompted some of them to shift and re-direct their focus; and in many rural areas affected by the disaster, they have been much more directly involved in helping women and their families. Currently, in the media and scholarship on Japanese politics, womenomics is center stage, but women at the community level and in civil society are the ones that can teach us more about the future of women's citizenship, representation, and equality in Japan's democracy.

In the field of political science and Japanese politics, there is a rich literature on Japan's electoral reforms with analysis of the implications of that institutional change for

the party system, elections, campaigns, and for many policy areas involving the economy, businesses and banking, local governance, and defense and security.<sup>1</sup> Yet few scholars analyze how these changes impacted gender politics and policies. The increased centralization of the policy process and the decreasing influence of the Left in the party system mean fewer opportunities for female activists and their allies to influence the policy agenda than before. Furthermore, the increasing neoliberal orientation of the current government, and the national and international targets of its womenomics agenda, can serve to marginalize women's participation in the political system. The lack of women's representation in national political institutions also obscures their greater visibility and activism in civil society. Women are participating; just not in elected bodies and the major organs of policymaking in the national government. The womenomics agenda and the activism of women at the community level highlight the increasing gap between women's participation in civil society versus their inclusion in national politics and policies. This gap has increased with the Abe government and with majorities in both chambers of the Diet and no viable opposition party, there has been more incentive for the opposition to mobilize and unify in civil society—outside of the existing institutions and system.

Womenomics itself is more of a response to international pressures and reflects the growing neoliberal orientation of the LDP-Komeito government. It is intended for an international audience, as explained by Joyce Gelb's (2003) and Chan-Tiberghien's (2004) earlier works on the influence of the United Nations on Japan's gender institutions and policies, and Petrice Flowers' argument that Japan conforms to international norms

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<sup>1</sup> The list for this body of work is quite long, but I will name a few key contributors here: Thies and Rosenbuth (2010), Estevez-Abe (2008), Shinoda (2013), Samuels (2008), Schaede (2008), Steel and Kabashima (2010), and Noble (2006).

about gender equality out of its desire for legitimacy in the international system. It is also not a new or radical strategy, but consistent with previous LDP reform agendas under prime ministers Hosokawa, Hashimoto, and Koizumi (Takeda 2006, Molony 1995, Murase 2006). Since the 1970s, activists, lawyers, and politicians on the Left championed women's causes and tried to set the legislative agenda. They had a brief interlude in which they could set the agenda when the LDP fell out of power; decentralization and Gender Equality bills were passed at this same time of fluid coalition governments, which included opposition parties.

However, feminist activists have not had the same level of access and influence since the government centralized its policymaking structure and the LDP-Komeito coalition became more consolidated (Hasunuma 2015). The powerful Advisory Councils in the executive office are smaller and less inclusive than before, and they tend to focus on economic and security policies. Therefore, women's roles and issues are framed through the goals and perspectives of these powerful new Councils, which prioritize women's economic and labor force contributions over their political equality and rights. This explains the way in which the Abe and previous LDP governments have framed women's equality as a matter of women's labor and economic contributions, but women's labor, especially those of housewives, is vital to some political campaigns and elections.

George Ehrhardt's has documented the effective vote mobilization strategies of women in the Komeito, the Liberal Democratic Party's junior coalition partner since 1999. He shows through his fieldwork how effective housewives are at vote mobilization. Housewives are the base of the party so once in government, Komeito prioritized the policy preferences of housewives over those that would help career women (Ehrhardt

2014).<sup>2</sup> Komeito policies do not help working women with childcare or other policies that promote work-life balance (Ehrhardt 2014). Beyond political parties, women are active in women's associations and more effective at mobilization than associations related to occupational groups (Steel 2004: 241).

There is a rich literature in political science, history, anthropology, and sociology of Japan's civil society (*shimin shakai*) and the actors that have flourished in this space since the 1995 Kobe earthquake, especially with the passage of the NPO law in 1998.<sup>3</sup> Many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs),<sup>4</sup> and religious organizations have worked alongside local governments in the relief and rebuilding efforts. Susan Pharr (1981), Sheldon Garon (2003), Robin LeBlanc (1999), Sherry Martin (2011), Mary Alice Haddad (2011), and Margarita Estevez-Abe (2008) have contributed valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of power and participation in Japan and the new role NGOs and NPOs serve in social welfare provision. Pekkanen (2006) and Ogawa (2010) demonstrated how civil society actors have limited access and influence to the legislative process, and how NPOs have taken on additional service responsibilities from the local governments without receiving funding.

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<sup>2</sup> See George Ehrhardt in *Komeito: Politics and Religion in Japan*, 2014, p. 204. He says that Komeito resembles a social democratic party in some respects, but its policies do not support working women. Komeito pursues policies preferred by its base of housewives in the Soka Gakkai's *fujinbu*. Therefore, Komeito pursued income support and domestic violence legislation instead of sexual harassment or work-family balance bills that would benefit career women.

<sup>3</sup> Please see Pekkanen (2006) and Ogawa (2010)'s work for a deeper analysis of the NPO law and its effects on civil society.

<sup>4</sup> I use Pekkanen's definition of civil society as "the organized, nonstate, nonmarket sector" (2003: 118) and the way in which he clarifies the use of NGO vs. NPO in Japan. In Japan, domestically active groups are called 'NPOs' while 'NGOs' usually refer to those in international activities. NPO includes all nonprofit organizations but in practice overlaps with the meaning Americans attach to NGOs. (Pekkanen 2003:120, footnote 8 in *The State and Civil Society in Japan*, Frank J. Schwartz and Susan J. Pharr, editors: 2003).

Their limited budgets constrain them to expand their membership and influence. Though more data is needed across all NPOs to determine the breakdown by gender, at least based on data of religious organizations that is available, women outnumber men in their membership and as volunteers for many NPOs (Cavaliere 2015).

Because women seek solutions through volunteer organizations and work on an individual level, they do not want to characterize their work as political in nature, and continue to face cultural and social sanctions for their participation. Their identity as mothers also has a powerful effect on the nature of their political activities (Le Blanc 1999). Motherhood gives women credibility and leverage in speaking up and out about matters that are in their responsibility: the provision of food, care, and a safe environment for their children. I will go through a few cases based on fieldwork to highlight some of these inspiring developments and sobering realities about the potential and limits for women's political participation in Japan today. The experiences of women can have important implications for policymaking, especially with respect to how the government prepares its disaster response, relief, and rebuilding efforts, but are their views actually included in these policy decisions? Rather than focus on womenomics and national efforts designed by national actors and institutions for the international audience, this project asks that we pay more attention to women who act as their own agents and find solutions for themselves and their communities, and to evaluate the costs of this self-reliance for their citizenship in Japan's democracy.

Since the Triple Disaster, women have moved into greater leadership roles and raised their presence and voice on matters related to their safety and the health of their families and communities. This continues a phenomenon that extends well into the last century. Even as far back as the Kanto earthquake of 1923, historians have documented



how women were actively involved in the relief efforts. The crisis gave them an opportunity to mobilize, raise political consciousness, and organize politically. It culminated in the growth of the women's suffrage movement (Kaneko 2011, Chapter 1 in Fujimura-Fanselow). Since the Triple Disaster, we have also seen women move into greater leadership roles about social service discussions, especially over the use of nuclear energy, food and environmental contamination, and the health of their families. Crisis can create opportunities for women to break out of gendered roles and norms.

There are studies on the politicization of the housewife (Machlachlan 2001; Kunihiro, Chapter. 24 in Fujimura-Fanselow; Erhardt 2014; Le Blanc 1999; and Steel 2004), and women's participation at the local level through women's centers, study groups, and simulated assemblies has great potential for involving more women into the political process (Martin 2011). This article follows up on those contributions to the field by providing a follow up. After disaster, how have women been participating and what are the implications of their participation post-disaster?

Japanese women are engaged and actively participating in civil society, but many do not want to consider their work to be political. Individual barriers are just as powerful as institutional ones. I draw upon insights from Nina Eliasoph's work on civil society and volunteerism in the United States (1998 and 2003) to think about this and its implications for Japanese politics. Women volunteer, mobilize, and use their leverage as mothers to bring attention to issues, especially in the media. Yet, there is resistance to actually running for office and going beyond a particular issue or local community concern.

In the field of gender politics, scholars tend to look at institutional, structural, and cultural barriers for explaining the variation in women's participation in parliaments. In Japan, these barriers remain high, and so women can be found outside of the government

doing important work that helps the local and national governments provide care and social welfare services to their communities.

## WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN TOHOKU AND KYOTO

Since the Triple Disasters of March 11, 2011 (mega-earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster), Japanese civil society has been reactivated. Tens of thousands came out to protest the restarting of nuclear power plants and to demand greater transparency and accountability on safety regulations. Women are at the fore of these protests and activities. For example, women and mothers from Fukushima were active participants in the anti-nuclear protests at the national parliament. They are learning from each other about food and environmental safety, radiation, domestic violence, and other issues. Some women activists outside of the policy process have also used the recent national discourse on gender to mobilize and raise the profiles of the groups they have formed or already work with to help women secure more rights and protections. The experiences of women during and since Hurricane Katrina (Enarson 2012; David and Enarson, 2012) echo through the rich ethnographic reports by sociologists like David Slater and Rika Morioka (2014) and Phoebe Holdgrun and Barbara Holthus (2015) who document the specific challenges of mothers in Fukushima. The durability of networks forged out of these disasters depends on the nature of the women volunteers and associations themselves, but faith-based associations in particular played a critical role in rebuilding communities in both New Orleans and Fukushima.

We have insights about women's mobilization from studies on the housewife base of support for Komeito and housewives who organized over environmental and other safety issues, especially related to nuclear energy in the 1970s, and consumer issues in the 1980s (Ehrhardt 2014, LeBlanc 1999, MacLachlan 2001; and Wohn, 2014, p. 245).

Since 3.11, women mobilized over food safety issues and created a food labeling system (Kimura 2014 and 2015). In these cases, women's participation is shaped and privileged by their roles as mothers who must assure the safety of their environment and food for their families, and take responsibility for shopping and other consumer expenses. In addition to these specific mother or family related causes and activism, women volunteer with religious organizations and perform important roles as care providers. The field also does not pay much attention to religious groups in Japan, but women are often mobilized through these channels and provide what religious studies scholar, Levi McLaughlin refers to as "spiritual care." A more complete and inclusive analysis of women's political participation must incorporate the work and insights of religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies.

Women have created networks and communities outside of national level institutions. In these alternative spaces, such as women's centers and ad hoc radiation centers, women are helping each other to manage the challenges they face in their daily lives, and to provide services their local and national governments are not able to provide to them. In areas like the Tohoku region, which was devastated by the Triple Disasters, women work together to find safe food and water for their families, and to get accurate readings of the radiation contamination levels in their environment. Through informal gatherings at salons, cafes, and workshops, women share resources with each other and provide mutual support in these informal and ad hoc spaces. Through these spaces and interactions in civil society, women activists and volunteers are filling an important need after the crisis and the slow or inadequate response of their local and the national governments.

The internet has also been a very powerful tool for mobilizing women in Fukushima. Slater, Nishimura and Kindstrand call this a “digital civil sphere” (in Kingston 2012, p. 95). Mobile phones and the internet create dynamic new spheres or digital spaces for connectivity, knowledge, and empowerment. This is a potentially rich area for future study as the internet has also contributed to the rise of women, including many housewives, and the right wing.

Through the work of NPOs, NGOs, and many religious and volunteer organizations, social support systems are being rebuilt gradually. Four years after 3.11, the people living in temporary housing have experienced greater rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental and physical health problems, and volunteers have had to step in to manage this growing public health crisis. Beyond disaster relief, recovery, and reconstruction is the task of rebuilding lives and communities, and this is where the work of women volunteers is most visible.

The political science scholarship focuses on national and local government responses, the implications for energy politics, and disaster relief preparedness policy development (Kingston 2012; Samuels 2013; Aldrich 2013) but the effects of disaster on women and the role of women deserve more attention and study because they experience the disaster differently, and they are coming up with their own solutions to manage the ongoing crisis four years later. McLaughlin (2013) reminds us that religious organizations are usually at the front lines--often the first to respond during a disaster and then in the aftermath by providing “spiritual care.” This supports existing arguments about how the third sector is used to provide social welfare services since Japan undertook decentralization reforms and downsized the size of its ministries and local governments during the Hashimoto and Koizumi administrations.

Even before the Triple Disaster, NGOs and NPOs were in these communities to promote awareness and develop educational programming about domestic violence and other issues affecting women. The increased and sustained presence of such groups and volunteers in the region seems to have given women an opportunity to question traditional gender norms and expectations as they begin rebuilding their lives and communities. The disasters tore apart many families. Villages and entire communities were swept away. Religious groups and social workers have been in the region and provide invaluable support to the people of Tohoku for relief and healing. After the disaster and the international outpouring of aid and volunteers, what remains is an infrastructure of women volunteers creating a new civil society across the region and country as well as online.<sup>5</sup>

Women in rural villages in particular, face powerful cultural pressures that may prevent them from actively engaging in what they consider to be political behavior, and they hesitate to have their work labeled as political. Cultural expectations and gender norms about being a proper wife and mother, and the pressure to not embarrass in-laws or elders, contribute to this unease. Yet, when mothers were not getting enough or accurate information from the local governments, they began to take action by going directly to school nurses and teachers to get more information (Slater and Morioka, 2014). For some women, who had already been working as activists on other issues, they used their experience and skills as political organizers and mobilizers, and redirected their political activity to the anti-nuclear movement because of 3.11. The crisis forced many

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<sup>5</sup> Aldrich (2008) explains how important it is to be mindful of building and rebuilding social infrastructure in addition to the material infrastructure involved in rebuilding after disaster.

women to take action to secure their immediate safety and to meet their family's immediate needs.

The women I interviewed mentioned that the UN's Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), its gender mainstreaming efforts, and the connections forged with women activists from the United States helped them get more involved in their communities. The women in my small sample often pointed to the American women they met as sources of inspiration for their new or renewed commitment to engaging in civil society and learning more about political issues. We should be careful about crediting western women and influences for the individual agency and political activation of these women, but there was appreciation for these people-to-people exchanges between the US and Japan through NGOs. In addition, Japanese activists from larger cities and those educated in larger cities, such as Tokyo, travel to more remote areas to help with relief efforts and to share resources for women.

One Japanese woman I interviewed had travelled abroad and studied English; another activist explained how important an NGO from New Hampshire was in educating her about the global purple ribbon campaign to create awareness about domestic violence. Religious organizations are vital to these networks of empowerment in rural areas. They were there for immediate disaster relief, but continued to do even more important work long after the disaster: helping women deal with mental health issues and mental and physical abuse. 3.11 has left behind a mental health crisis, and it is through these religious organizations and NPOs, that women are helping themselves---literally creating spaces to gather, talk, and support one another. In many ways, the services and support they were providing is therapeutic. They created safe spaces for women to vent, learn, and inspire each other. Many of these women are providing important mental

health services in the form of mothers' coffees or salons. For powerless women in a culture where mental health issues are not openly discussed, this is a significant public and private forum for exchange, learning, and support—and it came from their local communities or with the help of NGOs and NPOs rather than the local or national governments.

The YWCA, Catholic NGOs (such as CARITAS), and various groups affiliated with the American anti-nuclear and environmental movements were mentioned as important connections for these women. It is not a coincidence that the YWCA and religious organizations, especially Catholic and Buddhist ones stepped in quickly. These are well-established organizations with deep roots throughout both Japan and the world and with the infrastructure, personnel, training, and experience available for quick mobilization.

The American connection was vital to one activist I interviewed. Scientists and environmental activists in California were responsible for sharing radiation detection equipment and other information with my contact in Aizu. Her case is unique because she is using global environmental networks and resources with her previous training and experiences as a peace activist. The disaster and the government's response made her so angry that she decided to focus all of her energy on addressing the immediate needs and concerns of her local community, especially the mothers. This woman is a pastor's wife, and was already quite active in the peace movement (opposed to rearming Japan militarily and revising its pacifist constitution) in Japan before 3.11. She and her husband used the church facilities to create a physical space for women to gather and support one another. Religious and other recreational spaces were transformed after the disaster to provide the community urgently needed services. Through informational, spiritual, and

musical gatherings, women comforted each other, and provided a refuge for those struggling with depression and anxiety over the uncertainty of their futures.

Responses to the disasters created new opportunities for women to speak up and participate in the rebuilding of their communities and lives. But even in this case, due to the lack of childcare and social norms about male elders acting as the representatives and voice of local villages, some women felt they were not included in the government's efforts to address gender issues and disaster relief policies. In the more rural and isolated communities in the Tohoku area, resources and social or civil society infrastructures are harder to come by. Women's centers and community facilities require budgets and staff. Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo may have them, but in these far and remote rural fishing villages women must go to the next largest city. These areas also tend to be more traditional with respect to gender roles.

Women have become activated because of the immediate problems they need to solve everyday: finding food that is safe to eat, wondering where their children can safely play outside, easing strains families feel living in temporary housing, and finding opportunities they may have in the rebuilding of their communities. These women from Fukushima also struggle with stress, guilt, and anxiety over these day-to-day decisions. Physically, they are in cramped, standardized temporary housing units. Some just want toiletries that will make them feel pampered or feminine; some want flowers and small reminders of life, growth, and beauty.

One woman I interviewed from Ishinomaki said that the physical rebuilding is also an opportunity to rebuild gender relations. Women understand that it is not only their town that was washed away, but that many of "the old ways can also be washed away" as they move forward. They understand that they must act and seize the opportunities they have



now. Through disaster and recovery they discover empowerment and small acts can turn into local change.

My contact in Aizu Wakamatsu City, Fukushima, converted her husband's church and recreational area into a radiation center. At this radiation center, doctors help mothers by examining children and they have equipment from the US for monitoring radiation levels independent of the government's readings. She and her husband drive around in a car with the equipment and keep records to log the levels and any changes. The women and mothers who come to this Church and make shift radiation center have learned how to use the equipment and are comfortable with all the scientific and technological terms. They have become extremely knowledgeable about radiation and contamination. The church is a center for learning, mentoring, and is connected via Skype and the Internet.

She has women's support groups and gatherings called "shaberiba" to talk and vent to one another. They help each other use the Internet to buy safe produce from southern parts of Japan like Kyushu. So, if one has resources, one can buy safe food, but many women cannot afford to do so. She told me that one mother was suicidal and that there were increasing incidents of depression. Many are doubly burdened as they must take care of both children and elderly parents or in-laws so they experience greater stress (Koikare 2013; Slater and Morioka, 2014).

These women from the Tohoku area told me that they feel that Tokyoites have already forgotten them. These same women then explained to me how they want more person-to-person exchanges with Americans in particular so that they can open up their villages to new ideas and influences, and to learn English.

Previous experience and contacts abroad also made it easier for another woman I interviewed to start her own organization. A native of Ishinomaki, she had attended graduate school in the United States and worked with Doctors without Borders in Eastern Europe. To lift the spirits of residents in temporary housing and to add more color and provide activities for them, she set up her own charity to plant flowers around the village. Children, men, women, and volunteers from all over Japan and the world came by to help out or to donate money, flower bulbs, and other planting supplies. She is also affiliated with the local Ishinomaki NPO center, which works on education, social services for children and seniors, and support for families. Through social media and the Internet, she has been developing relationships and exchanges between women in Fukushima and in the US.

## KYOTO

My contact in Kyoto worked for a Christian Temperance Union shelter, which assisted migrant women and dealt with trafficking issues before she had come to Kyoto. Through Christian organizations in Claremont, CA and Jesuit, Lutheran, and Volunteer corps, she created networks in the US and Japan. She told me about how many women from the Tohoku area came to Kyoto in search of safety. When I interviewed her in the spring of 2014, she said there were 700-800 of them in Kyoto. It took some of them a year to leave Tohoku because they have grandparents living with them and feel a lot of guilt about leaving friends and relatives behind. Many families became separated during and after the disaster—these are now called nuclear divorces. Usually the husband stays behind while the mother and children leave the area to stay with family or friends, or are relocated (Slater 2011; Slater and Morioka, 2014). There is also a sense that these women are breaking the family lineage and betraying their families by leaving—for some women

this means they have lost their right to speak as a member of that community (Koikare 2013).

During our interview, she told me that some women live in Kyoto with friends and relatives and pay double rent. The wife usually pays for housing in Kyoto and the husband is in Fukushima paying rent there. The government money only goes to those in areas declared to be evacuated so if you are not in that category, you do not receive financial support of any kind. So for some families, this is quit a hardship.

Similar to the anti-nuclear movement of the late 1980s and 1990s, some mothers did not trust the national government and did not want to join in a direct political movement. “Momma demos” (protests by mothers) or protests are limited in that they cannot bring in unions or political groups. These non-political groups are doing political work, however. According to Slater and Morioka (2014), women are activated to protest but fear being labeled as anti-nuclear protestors. Even the pamphlets they distribute are carefully worded so that rather than appear to be confrontational and anti-nuclear, they focus more on food, ground, and air issues, so that the city government will accept their educational materials.

Some women protestors who oppose nuclear energy are labeled as unstable, nervous, or hysterical mothers (These very high social costs and sanctions make some women feel their work is not political and intentionally try to separate it from the political realm (Slater and Morioka, 2014). Slater calls these women “reluctant activists” and younger women are caught in the middle because of husbands and mothers-in-law who put additional pressure on women to maintain good standing and the family’s reputation.

Another barrier is that many NGOs and NPOs have single goals or issues and are not unified. There are a lot of women activated and engaged because of 3.11, but the

groups they join often work on their own and are not coordinated or unified in a way that could make them more politically powerful. According to Walker (2002), when people see voluntary actions as an alternative to politics, they will consider individual actions to be solutions to social issues without seeking changes required in the system.

Volunteerism is a consequence and an important pillar of neoliberal reforms which downsized the government and created more labor without compensating women for the labor they provide. Even though women are mobilized and reactivated to engage in politics because of 3.11, there are constraints to how much these networks can advance a women's political agenda from the bottom up, collectively. The question of coordinating and incorporating these groups and women activists is the key.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR DISASTER AND DECONTAMINATION POLICIES

The Japanese government is working with the United Nations on their decontamination efforts. Roundtables were set up to include local participation. The first round was at the prefectural level; the second was for information sharing; and the third was for cities. I was able to interview the director of this effort who was working for the Japanese government and the United Nations to see how gender and women's issues and activism affected this process. Sadly, contrary to the government's advertisement of including gender in their disaster preparedness and response policies, in this process, women were not included as promised (Interview in Tokyo, Japan April 2014).

When I asked the director, I was informed that their work was not connected to the Gender Equality Bureau or the Disaster and Gender efforts at all. They are scientists and environmentalists who have specific tasks to accomplish and are not really prioritizing women's issues and roles. When I pushed the director for more information,

he said that one mother mentioned during a roundtable meeting that the local community has meetings for the future plans of the community, but only elderly men attend these gatherings. It is difficult for younger people to attend because they are at work. Even the timing of the events matter. If it is during the week, it excludes men; if it is during the weekend, other issues can be included, but it may mean fewer women can attend because of childcare. He did confirm that based on his observations, there are more women who are active in the local areas and that women are leading the role in OGUNI areas where farmers cultivate rice and measure contamination at food monitoring centers. These activated women focus on issues related to women, children, and elderly people's health such as cancers and mental illnesses. He also added that in Fukushima, two to three generations of families live together so it is hard for the elderly in temporary housing and hard for younger people to find jobs. There is conflict over the decontamination process because of the compensation issues. At the time I interviewed him three years had passed, so there was less support for giving money to evacuees.

Studying women's political movements in Japan means understanding the various political contexts and constraints that shaped the opportunities for these political actions. The government has delegated power to other actors, empowering civil society organizations and individual citizens. At the national level, nongovernmental organizations are more involved in policy making and are participating in foreign policy conferences, and responsible for providing services (Haddad 2012). Thus, after the great Kobe earthquake and changes to the NPO law in 1998, Japan has privatized and contracted out many social welfare activities and services. For women who participate more easily at the local and civil society level, they become part of this system of providing care and accessing care in this sector.

In Yuki Matsuoka's work on women and disaster relief, she contests the stereotype that women were helpless victims in times of disasters. "Women have the knowledge, the organizational networking capabilities, and the proven ability to lead in the planning and implementation of disaster risk reduction and response." The reports from a governmental panel exploring disaster and gender said that pressure from the international community could help tip the balance towards gender equality in disaster risk reduction in countries such as Japan (Matsuoka, 2012) "A lot of actual work is being done by women, but not integrated into policies and the decision-making process. It is a challenge for women to be visible. In disaster risk reduction, more social issues need to be advanced, not just infrastructure related issues," said former Governor of Chiba Prefecture in Japan, Akiko Domoto (Matsuoka, 2012).

After the Kobe earthquake, revisions were made to the Basic Plan for Disaster Prevention of Japan in December 2011. Hiroko Hara, a professor specializing in gender issues at Josai International University and Professor Emeritus of Ochanomizu University, said although the revised plan incorporates the gender equality perspective, a section of the plan dealing with disaster, restoration and reconstruction, "lacks the perspectives of gender equality or had no mention of gender equality under several sub-items."

The Chair of the NGO Gender Action Platform, Yoriko Meguro, highlighted areas in Japanese policy where there was inadequate consideration of specific needs of women and unequal access to economic support to women. She also pointed out the existing institutional gaps in supporting pregnant and nursing mothers after disasters. With support from Oxfam Japan, her NGO is seeking to influence government policy on gender and disaster risk reduction. Women's Net Kobe is a women's network that

distributed relief goods and offered telephone counseling to women after the Kobe Earthquake in 1995. After the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, a similar women's network was created for the East Japan Disaster, conducting surveys and producing publications on women's needs in and after disasters, which was submitted to the government to support policy recommendations. Reiko Masai, the President of Women's Net Kobe said "When I visited the quake-devastated area, I observed that measures to prevent violence against women had been put in place, which was different from 16 years ago. What had not changed was the lack of a female presence in operational management, which reinforced gender-based roles at evaluation shelters" (Gender Equality Bureau report).

Keiko Takegawa, Deputy Director-General for Gender Equality, in Japan's Cabinet Office, "Disaster Prevention and Reconstruction from a Gender Equal Society Perspective -- Lessons from the Great East Japan Earthquake," confirms this view, reporting the traditional gender roles perpetuated through the idea that men should clear rubble while women should prepare meals for the evacuation site. In many cases, a daily allowance was provided for clearing rubble while no such compensation was provided for working on food preparation. Yoko Saito, a Researcher at the Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institute (DRI), which co-organized the dialogue with the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction in Kobe, also stressed the importance of gender equality in shelter management, including responsibility sharing within shelters. The Institute celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, having trained 5,000 people -- mostly local government officers and some heads of local government -- in disaster risk reduction. (From the "International cooperation towards the Creation of a Society Safe and Secure against Disasters", co-organized by UNISDR and the Disaster Reduction and

Human Renovation Institute [DRI], a body established in 2002 by the Hyogo Prefectural government and supported by the Japanese national government).

On October 27, women from Fukushima prefecture began a three-day sit-in outside the METI Explain demanding “no more nuclear power.” Two hundred women from Fukushima and more than 2000 women from outside the prefecture participated (“Fukushima Women’s Three-day Sit-in”). They demanded the creation of a society based on alternative sources of energy and submitted a written petition to the officials at METI. The petition consisted of 4 items: immediately stop all the nuclear reactors in operation and decommission them, do not restart nuclear reactors, protect and evacuate children from contaminated areas, and compensate them fully for their losses, and to repeal 3 laws of power sources: the Tax Law on Electric Power Development Acceleration, the Law on Special Accounts for Electric Power Development Acceleration Measures, and the Act on the Development of Areas Adjacent to Electric Power Generating Facilities because they provide local with subsidies and impede their independence. After the 3 day sit-in, women from various organizations who supported Fukushima women conducted a 10-day sit in from Oct. 30-Nov. 5. They distributed flyers in front of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, the MHLW, and the Cabinet Office.

(Holdgrun and Holthus, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

After disasters, women find and make their own space separate from the state and politics. They reclaim a virtual and psychic territory for themselves among the chaos and uncertainty, and in tacit resistance to the control of the government and social expectations and pressures. Women’s activism is constrained in many ways as Slater,



Morioka, and others have documented, but there are ways in which women can flourish and reclaim their roles as citizens and do the work of activating others--educating, mobilizing, and supporting one another through the overwhelming challenges they face in the personal lives and their natural and physical environments. Japan's women's centers, women's groups, NPOs, NGOs, and religious organizations connect women across sites and cultures, and help them overcome powerful political barriers. Digital technology is also playing an important role in women's political engagement.

Women have the potential to build social capital but do not pursue strong advocacy roles. Normative gender roles make mothers the ones to protect and defend children (Eliasoph's "mom discourse"), but there is a personal cost to them and their families. Holdgrun and Holthus (2014) did extensive fieldwork and found that this personal cost was part of women's strategy: using weak advocacy as a longer-term strategy. They used their leverage as moms and asked for informal meetings with politicians to get more information (Holdgrun and Holthus, 2014).

International indices on gender gaps and reports on the lack of women in elected offices at the national level and in national level institutions set important guidelines for comparison, but also do not capture women's agency at the micro, community, local, and individual levels. Women are quite deeply engaged—in varying degrees—in citizenship at the civil society and local levels, but at the cost of formal representation and national policy influence. The current government's focus on integrating women into the economy and setting targets at the national level is to be applauded, but how can it better harness and integrate the energy and activism of women at the local levels? If we look beyond womenomics and national institutions, we see a different picture of women's citizenship

and participation in Japan, and the great potential at the community and civil society levels for deepening democracy.

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