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# In Japan, a Mothers' Movement Against Nuclear Power

The Fukushima disaster has brought a powerful new demographic to Japan's anti-nuclear movement: mothers.  
by Heidi Hutner  
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Tomoi Zeimer and her adopted daughter.

Photo by Olivia Sydney Fine

On the one-year anniversary of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japanese women in New York City gathered for a rally they called Pregnant With Fear of Radiation. Protestors wore fake pregnant bellies, or carried posters with images of pregnant women wearing face masks.

Well aware that fetuses, children under five, and women are at the greatest risk from radiation exposure, mothers have emerged as a powerful voice in Japan's growing anti-nuclear movement.

To call attention to their message, the mothers have organized marches, petitioned government officials, fasted, and held months-long sit-ins in public locations. They regularly wear symbols of maternity and motherhood in deliberately confrontational ways.

The mothers call for action on multiple fronts. Most immediately, they demand the evacuation of all the families of Fukushima, where radiation emissions continue. They ask for tougher safety standards for food and drink in Japan, and an end to the practice of spreading and burning radioactive rubble from the contaminated zone throughout the country's various prefectures. And, to prevent future disasters, they call for the permanent closure of all nuclear power plants in Japan and throughout the world.

**“I couldn't wait anymore for someone else to take action.”**

The rise of maternal anti-nuclear activism in Japan began shortly after the March 11, 2011 disaster, when the hundreds of thousands of residents of Fukushima living outside the 20-kilometer evacuation zone were told it was safe to stay. Soon after the plant failed, the Japanese government raised the maximum limit of radiation considered safe, from 1mSv (millesieverts) prior to March 11 to 20mSv. This new measure exposed (and exposes) the people of Fukushima to doses 20 times higher than is normally considered safe.



Pregnant With Fear anti-nuclear rally and march in NYC, commemorating the one-year anniversary of the Fukushima disaster.

Photo by Heidi Hutner

The families of Fukushima whom the government did not evacuate face a hard choice: leave of their own accord and abandon their homes and jobs (while continuing to be responsible to pay taxes, rents, and/or mortgages), or remain in Fukushima and expose their families to dangerous levels of radiation?

According to mother and activist Kaori Izumi, gender plays into responses to this precarious situation. Often, mothers and women want to leave Fukushima and protect their kids, while men tend to accept the line, from the government and the utility, Tepco, that “all is safe.” This can lead to conflict in a culture where women are taught not to challenge their husbands or government, figures of authority.

Many worried mothers leave Fukushima with their children while fathers remain behind. “Often husbands don’t want to support two households and they tell the wives to come back to Fukushima, or they’ll stop sending them money,” says Izumi. “As a result, we’re seeing an increase in divorce rates.”

Izumi recounts her own story as a mother-activist. “I was not an activist before Fukushima. I’m a social scientist by training. I kept waiting for someone else to do something, to act, to challenge the government and Tepco for these crimes. Then I couldn’t wait anymore for someone else to take action. I had to do something.”

So, Izumi hit the streets, and during protest rallies, met other mothers working for justice. She brought several lawsuits against the nuclear industry at her own expense. She also organized a vacation program to house Fukushima families during school breaks, so children can gain some relief from radiation exposure—even if only for short periods. Now, she heads up a group working to permanently shut down the Tomari nuclear plant.

## Radiation, rubble, and relocation

Tomoi Zeimer, a Japanese mother living in New York City, and her two sisters in Osaka (both of them also mothers), began anti-nuclear activism after Prime Minister Noda’s requirement that prefectures throughout Japan accept and incinerate radioactive rubble so that all of Japan would “share the pain” of Fukushima. In response to Noda’s decision, Zeimer began a petition campaign to stop the spreading of radioactive rubble. Mothers delivered this petition on November 2, 2011 to Japanese consulates across the globe.

As the spreading of rubble continues, more and more women throughout the world have joined the fight (their petition is here). Here is a map showing the current status of the rubble spreading and burning.

“Americans must learn from the Fukushima disaster. You must shut down your own plants, 23 of which are the same design as the Fukushima reactors... Yes, it can happen here.”

Many activist mothers worry about their children's health and feel they must leave the country. Ikuko Nitta left Fukushima the day after the disaster at her 12-year-old son's insistence; they moved to Wakayama, believing it to be safe. When Wakayama agreed to accept rubble and incinerate it, Nitta began to make plans to move to Canada. When she recently tested her children's radiation levels, her son tested positive for Cesium 137. Where the contamination came from, Nitta does not know, as they left Fukushima so quickly and she monitors the children's food very carefully.

Cathy Iwane, a Wakayama mother who led the recent fight to stop the spreading of rubble to Wakayama, plans to immigrate to the United States. While she despairs about the Wakayama decision and worries about the children of Japan, she says the bonds she's formed with women across the world, who support Japanese anti-nuclear activism, fill her with hope.

"I won't give up," Iwane says. "Not ever."

## An opportunity

The movement isn't confined to Japan's borders. In September, 2011, a group of Japanese mothers, including Sachiko Sato, an organic farmer who traveled with her youngest two children) Kaori Izumi, and Aileen Mioko Smith came to New York City to protest Prime Minister Noda's participation in the UN summit on nuclear safety. "How can you talk about safety?" Sachiko shouted to Noda outside the UN. "You don't even take care of the children of Fukushima."



Pregnant With Fear anti-nuclear rally and march in NYC, commemorating the one-year anniversary of the Fukushima disaster.

Photo by Heidi Hutner

Sachiko, Izumi, and Smith spoke at various anti-nuclear events throughout the New York City area during their visit, urging American citizens to learn a lesson from the disaster in Japan. At one event, Smith stated, "Many Americans live far too close to nuclear power plants that sit on earthquake fault lines—Indian Point in Buchanan, New York, only thirty or so miles from New York City, as well as those on the coast in California. Americans must learn from the Fukushima disaster. You must shut down your own plants, 23 of which are the same design as the Fukushima reactors, GE Mark I. Yes, it can happen here."

In October 2011, hundreds of mothers in Japan began a protest in Tokyo at the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. The protest will last 10 months and 10 days (the length of time a pregnancy lasts under Japan's traditional lunar calendar).

Smith, who is executive director of Green Action, an anti-nuclear NGO based in Kyoto, says the Fukushima accident offers a chance to put an end to nuclear power. Most of Japan's nuclear reactors were taken offline after the disaster; as of this writing, only one nuclear power plant remains online.

Smith says, "For the first time in 30 years, we have a real opportunity" to shut down nuclear reactors in Japan for good.



Heidi Hutner wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Heidi is a professor of sustainability, English, and women's studies at Stony Brook University, where she writes, speaks, and teaches about the environment and gender. Her forthcoming book is entitled, *Polluting Mama: An Ecofeminist Cultural Memoir* (Demeter, 2012). She keeps the blog, *Ecofeminist and Mothering Ruminations*.

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