

May 28, 2021

Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture

Digital Social Science and Oral Narrative Research Unit presents

# Women Speaking up for Fukushima then and now: video oral narrative research



When the triple disasters occurred, everyone was affected as land, communities, families, and confidences were broken apart. Many women felt that in the aftermath, it fell disproportionately on them to not only cope with the consequences of the disaster, but also to speak out in a time when many men did not—or could not. For some, this moment of rupture was also one of possibility—to see and name the significance of what is often obscured by the layering of social relations, political expediency, and capital accumulation—that is, daily life. In the months and years that followed, we saw that women were often the most forceful and articulate voices in the anti-nuclear debates, but also it was often women who mounted larger critiques of environmental degradation and state censorship across and beyond Japan. But more often, women, like men, addressed more local concerns of their own communities, families, and children, situations where they were most invested and where they had most to lose, in speaking up. These situations are often the most difficult to raise your voice in, especially when that voice had been chronically marginalized even before the disasters. Our panels look at the dynamics of speaking up then and now.

Each presentation rests on previous research done in post-311. Earlier in 2021, the researchers went back to re-interview some of the women, as they reflected on their previous activism and tell us about shifts in their patterns of political engagement today. The presenters are all contributing members to the Voices of Tohoku Project (<https://tohokukaranokoe.org/>) at Sophia University, an oral narrative project of more than 500 hours of video interviews collected from 2011 to 2016, and they will be drawing on this video archive to show clips of our narrators.



May 28<sup>th</sup>

10:00 AM – 11:30 AM (JST)

On Zoom

Register from [HERE](#)

## Program

Introductory remarks: **David H. Slater**

*"Intimacy of Risk and Absence of Political Engagement - Mothers Living in Fukushima and Their Quest to Normality"* / **Maya Houser**

*"Pushing against gender and social norms: local women's groups in Fukushima after 3/11"* / **Rebecca Milner**

*"Japanese society and women's activism: Mothers Against War and their reflections after 5 years of activism"* / **Ana María Liceras Garrido** and **Nguyen Phuoc Quy Tuong**

*"Militant Women's Post-3.11 Politics: Women From Fukushima Against Nuclear Power"* / **Satsuki Uno**

Discussion: **Robin O'Day**



## Participants and Presentation Abstracts

### 1. Maya Houser

MA Graduate from the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University

#### ***"Intimacy of Risk and Absence of Political Engagement: Mothers living in Fukushima and their quest for normality"***

This presentation looks at how mothers living in a city near the site of the Fukushima nuclear accident view the risk of radiation and how they came to cope with it. The mothers interviewed called



themselves “regular mothers” (*futsuu no mama*)—distinguishing themselves from women who are organized and politically active. Interviews revealed that for most of them, the goal was to regain normal life for their children and their family, and to avoid confrontation with their community. On a more personal level, they sought to avoid being too consumed by the panic and/or

numbing fear of radiation. For them, radiation risk is a day-to-day concern, manifested in everything they did, rather than an abstract, political or ideological issue about nuclear energy or governmental venality. I’ve called this the ‘intimacy of risk.’ I will show how this intimacy of risk is not limited to radiation but also defines their social relationships within the community, and how it also works against local political engagement.

### 2. Rebecca Milner

Graduate School of Global Studies, Program in Japanese Studies, Sophia University

#### ***“Pushing Against Gender and Social Norms: Local women’s groups in Fukushima after 3/11”***

Faced with community, institutional and national pressure to downplay safety concerns in favor of economic-based recovery, women in Fukushima found themselves in a position where voicing concern about radiation was difficult. This presentation looks at women who worked within their communities to challenge the government decree that Fukushima (outside the exclusion zone) was “safe.” In their own words, they explain the barriers they faced when speaking up and how they were able to carve out space for their voices, using strategic framing devices and citizen science to overcome (often gendered) biases to make incremental changes in their communities. While they do not then consider themselves activists (*katsudoka*) and prefer to work behind the scenes and within the system, their activities and accomplishments help to fill in a more nuanced portrait of civic engagement post-3.11. Follow-up interviews allowed both activists to reflect upon the choices, rationale, and efficacy of their engagement.



### 3. Ana María Liceras Garrido and Nguyen Phuoc Quy Tuong

MA Graduates from the Graduate School of Global Studies, Program in Japanese Studies, Sophia University

***“Japanese Society and Women’s activism: Mothers Against War and their reflections after 5 years of activism”*** (安保関連法に反対するママ)

Mothers Against War (MAW) is an open-membership social movement organization established in 2015 to protest against a set of security bills proposed and eventually approved by the Abe Administration. MAW emerged in the wave of protest that followed the large anti-nuclear protests in 2011 as various groups sought to raise their grievances more publicly. Back in 2015 we conducted a set of ethnographic interviews with its members, mothers and women, who expressed a desire to raise their voices in a society in which they felt they could not communicate their concerns about politics in their everyday lives. For them, MAW was a space where they felt comfortable expressing their concerns with other like-minded women. MAW strategically deployed the image of “motherhood” (*bosei*) with its orientation towards protecting children to frame their position as they ventured into political protest and mobilization. In our 2021 re-interviews, members shared with us the various paths that their activism has taken. To our surprise, a number of our narrators had dropped their mother-centered framing as “outdated” and “not inclusive enough.” Yet, they also expressed their views about how much Japanese society has opened up over the past five years, and how they are finding new and more prominent roles in their community to speak up.

### 4. Satsuki Uno

MA Graduate from ITASIA program, University of Tokyo III/GSII

***“Militant Women’s Post-3.11 Politics: Women From Fukushima Against Nuclear Power”*** (原発いらない福島の人たち)

Immediately after the triple disaster in 2011, seasoned women activists effectively leveraged their national networks to mobilize people in large and high-profile political demonstrations, under the name of “*Genpatsu Iranai Fukushima No Onna-tachi*.” They were able to frame the issues of radiation and nuclear threat as a distinctly women’s issue. This strategic essentialization of the characteristics inherent in both women and motherhood provided them with a social and political platform from which to speak up in opposition to radiation and nuclear energy as part of their cultural and national duty as women: to raise the next generation of healthy children in a safe environment. Through interviews and fieldwork, this presentation will outline what members refer to as a ‘women’s way of doing politics,’ one centered more on the issues of everyday life (*inochi*), their flexible connections, and loose memberships. In our follow-up interviews, we have asked some of the leaders to provide a retrospective view of the anti-nuclear movement in Japan since the Fukushima Daiichi disaster in 2011 within their own much longer personal history of political activism.



This event is organized by David H. Slater (FLA, Sophia University) and Robin O’Day (North Georgia University)

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