
Anti-Nuclear Movement and ‘Motherhood’ in Post-War Japan: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: The peace and anti-nuclear movement in a half century of post-war Japan is marked by the concept of ‘motherhood’: while mothers as ‘peace-seekers and protectors of children’ actually but also conceptually have driven the movement since its beginning in the 1950s, feminists have expressed their concern about the phenomenon because of its emphasis on the ‘traditional’ gender role which could set a limit to the public recognition of the influence of nuclear power. Yet, through tracing the relationship between the concept of ‘motherhood’ and feminism with regard to the peace and the anti-nuclear movement in post-war Japan, we can see the revolutionary possibility of the concept of ‘motherhood’ because it has the potential to move the private to the public.

Since the great earthquake and the nuclear power plant incident in the northeast part of Japan, we have witnessed the revival of the anti-nuclear movement. The risk of living in a radiation-polluted country has made us rethink our way of life, our future, and our bodies, closely related to what feminism has been focused on. In fact, feminists should have taken up the cause of furthering the role of ‘motherhood’ in ensuring children’s health and reproduction of life. There is a complicated relationship between feminism and motherhood in the pacifist and anti-nuclear movement in Japan. Tracing the feminist debate which has developed around motherhood, this study will focus on three points, as follows. First, it identifies the feminist concerns regarding the return of the concept of motherhood to the women’s anti-nuclear movement. This topic will be analysed from historical and ideological perspectives in relation to the connotations of the concept of motherhood in post-war Japan. Second, this paper attempts to gauge the effect of this controversy

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on the larger community, outside of feminism and the women's movement. This must be understood in terms of the gendered enclosure of the peace and anti-nuclear movement. Third, this paper considers the limits and potential of the concept of motherhood today. By considering these aspects, the study will examine the impact of feminism on intellectual history and critical activism in modern Japan.

Anti-nuclear movement by mothers. The beginning of the anti-nuclear movement in Japan

The anti-nuclear movement in post-war Japan is marked by its use of the concept of 'motherhood' as a symbol of peace. The first large-scale anti-nuclear movement began when an H-bomb test conducted by the United States in Bikini Atoll hit and exposed many Japanese fishing boats to radiation in March 1954. One of the boats was Dai Go Fukuryu Maru (Lucky Dragon 5). Its crew suffered from acute radiation syndrome and the radio operator Kuboyama Aikichi died in September. He was the first casualty of a nuclear incident after the Second World War.

The incident also led to fears regarding radiation contamination of fish. The housewives in Tokyo, worrying about their children's future health, conducted a petition drive in April of the same year to collect signatures for a petition against the use of the atomic and hydrogen bombs. It immediately became a nationwide petition and eventually collected 30 million signatures¹. This movement then evolved into the 'Mothers' Congress', the first national meeting of which was held in June 1955 in Hiroshima, one of the two cities hit by the a-bomb, followed by the first international meeting in Switzerland in the same year².

It is worth mentioning that the International Mothers' Congress recommended the 'peaceful use' of nuclear energy while opposing its use in weapons³. Since then, the Japan Mothers' Congress has been meeting annually, and have 'Mothers who bear lives hope to rear and protect them' as their slogan.

¹ For the movement led by 'housewives' in Suginami, Tokyo, see Maruhama Eriko, *Gensuikin shomei undo no tanjo: Tokyo, Suginami no jumin pawa to suimyaku (The rise of the petition against atomic and hydrogen bombs: the power and vein of population in Suginami, Tokyo)* [Gaifuusha, 2011] (丸浜江里子『原水禁署名運動の誕生 東京・杉並の住民パワーと水脈』凱風社、2011年)

² Vera Mackie, 'From Hiroshima to Lausanne: the World Congress of Mothers and the Hahaoya Taikai in the 1950s' in *Women's History Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2016, 671-695.

³ The discourse of 'peaceful use of nuclear power' has its origin in the speech delivered by the US President Eisenhower to the UN General Assembly on December 1953, titled 'Atoms for Peace'. Kano Mikiyo, *Hiroshima to Fukushima no aida: jenda no shiten kara (Between Hiroshima and Fukushima: from the gender perspective)* [Inpakuto shuppankai, 2013] (加納実紀代『ヒロシマとフクシマのあいだ：ジェンダーの視点から』インパクト出版会、2013年), 35.

The representation of nuclear power in the 1950s

In August 1955, ‘World Meeting Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs’, the first international meeting of groups against nuclear weapons, was held in Hiroshima, in which 5000 people gathered including the delegates from 11 countries such as China, Australia, and the United States. The year 1955 was the year for peace. Behind the rapid spreading of the movements and the fears concerning nuclear power and its effects on future health, was the conclusion of San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952, a historical turning point in the post-war Japan. In a country which had just recovered its independence through this treaty, information about the damage caused by the atomic bomb was released to the public, which was almost unprecedented⁴. In the late 1940s, owing to the restraints imposed on the press by the occupation army, Japanese people generally had little opportunity to know about the damage caused by the atomic bomb. Additionally, the media had been permitted to release information regarding ‘peaceful use’ or the use of nuclear power in science and technology. Kano Mikiyo, a feminist historian who passed away recently, proved that the representation of the damage caused by the atomic bomb was highly gendered in the 1950s. The cover of the pictorial magazine *Asahi Graph*’s issue of August 6, 1952, the seventh anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, featured a young woman with a smile sitting on the Peace Bridge in Hiroshima, which was built in the same year and designed by the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The issue featured the victims of the bombing and the images of the victims of fire gravely shocked the readers. Another example of the gendered representation is the ‘Hiroshima Maidens’. The young girls, who were seriously disfigured during the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, became the symbols of the victims of nuclear warfare. A female author was shocked by their visible scars and felt pity for the girls because ‘their age was suitable for marriage’ in 1952. The author began collecting donations for their plastic surgery. The girls finally visited the United States to get treated for keloid in 1955⁵. In 1955, Sasaki Sadako, another girl who became a symbol of the victims of nuclear warfare, died of leukaemia at 12. Her sad story soon became widely known through newspaper articles, books, and a film (1958), which depicted her patience, thoughtfulness, and innocence. There is a statue of Sasaki Sadako in the Hiroshima Peace Park⁶. Several films and novels – including *Children of Hiroshima* directed by Shindo Kaneto, released in 1952, *Hiroshima* directed by Sekikawa Hideo, released in 1953 (both films are based on *Children of Hiroshima*, a collection of stories by children affected by the bombing, published in 1951), and Ota Yoko’s works also featured young females as victims.

⁴ Kano, op. cit., 95.

⁵ Nakaya Izumi, *Genbaku otome (Hiroshima maidens)* in Kawaguchi Takayuki (ed.), ‘*Genbaku*’ o yomu bunka jiten (*Cultural encyclopedia for reading ‘Atomic Bombing’*) [Seikyusha, 2017], 281-5.

⁶ Kano, op. cit., 90-110; Kusuda Tsuyoshi, *Orizuru to Sadako no monogatari (Story of folded-paper cranes and Sadako)* in Kawaguchi, op. cit., 178-182.

In the information which flooded Japan in the late 1950s regarding the damage caused by the bombing, the representation of the victims of nuclear warfare was dominated by the female figure, depicted as innocent, pitiful, and fragile, traits traditionally associated with femininity. In such a narrative, a victim's misfortune comes to the fore and the history of war transforms into individual tragedy. Even in documentary films, the fear concerning the future is communicated through young women. A science documentary film made in 1957 by Kamei Fumio, *The World is terrified: the reality of the ash of death*, accurately recorded the efforts of the scientists trying to prove the effects of fallout of the nuclear test using very simple instruments, and at the same time, persistently presented the images of specimens of unborn babies with impairments supposedly caused by the atomic bombing. A mother who has a daughter with microcephaly expresses her anxiety about having a second child. Focusing on the visibility of the effects and repeating the concern for the future, all of these female figures express their fear of radiation in terms of the difficulties in their own life, and in the reproduction of new lives in the nuclear age. Japanese art historian Chino Kaori has pointed out the differences between the impressions given by young female or male figures in the exhibition in war museums. While a young male figure – a boy who can grow up to be a soldier and go to the battlefield – represents masculinity, a young female figure – a girl who can never go to war and will be a mother – is conveniently equated with peace⁷.

As seen in *The World is terrified*, sometimes the young female character has two functions: a mother and a child. There is a bronze statue in the Hiroshima Peace Park called 'a Mother and a Child in the Storm', erected in 1960. According to the city of Hiroshima, the statue represents a mother praying for peace, and overcoming suffering and grief by giving/showing affection⁸. The figure of a mother can represent not only victimhood but also her ability to protect children and look forward to the future – the singularity and commonality of nuclear experiences overlap here. Such representation of women contributed to the anti-nuclear activism which began in 1954.

The notion of motherhood and the peace and anti-nuclear activism, thus, have been strongly associated with each other in Japan. Various anti-nuclear movements in Japan, particularly those opposing nuclear power generation, have featured 'mothers' who 'bear and care for children', whether the women really are mothers or not. As a reason for this, female writer Kansha Taeko pointed out the fear among women of giving birth to a child with deformity, similar to those mothers who were affected by eating contaminated food in the years following the Chernobyl inci-

⁷ Chino Kaori, 'Senso to shokuminchi no tenji: myujiamu no naka no "nihon"' (Exhibition of war and colonialism: 'Japan' in the museums) in Kurihara Akira et al. (eds.), *Ekkyo suru chi 1. Shintai: yomigaeru (Transboundary knowledge 1: Body, to revive)* [Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 2000] (千野香織「戦争と植民地の展示—

ミュージアムの中の「日本」」栗原彬他編『越境する知1 身体：よみがえる』東京大学出版会、2000年), 126-7.

⁸ http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/virtual/VirtualMuseum_j/tour/ireihi/tour_31.html (accessed on July 31, 2019)

dent⁹. Her anxiety was based on scientific evidence, but underpinned by the rhetoric of the ‘true nature of [the] mother’. These characteristics of earlier movements have been inherited by the anti-nuclear movement since 2011 when the women’s anti-nuclear movement resurged. Women organised many demonstrations in the cities throughout Japan and sit-ins in front of the building of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) [Figure 1], and demanded that their municipalities measure radiation in school meals, schoolyards, and school routes. These activities were conducted under the slogan ‘protect our children’.

On the occasion of the sit-in called by a feminist group in October 2011, those who participated – it was unusual for a social movement in Japan that most of them were women – communicated their concerns through banners: ‘Children’s lives matter’, ‘I have a child of one-year old’, ‘I am a mother of small children. I am against nuclear energy’, ‘For children, for the future of Japan’, ‘For children, Earth and the future, stop nuclear power, move to sustainable energy’ [Figure 2]. ‘The mothers in Japan have the same feeling as the mothers in the Soviet Union and in Europe had 25 years ago. It is universal that the mothers look after their children with loving care, wishing for the better future’, maintained Kansha in 2011¹⁰. The notion of motherhood, linked with the expectations for future peace, has repeatedly appeared at different points during the anti-nuclear movement in post-war Japan.

Feminist criticism of ‘motherhood’. Women and the responsibility of war and invasion

In the 1970s, when the women’s liberation movement was still emerging, Japanese feminist activists and scholars started to criticise the notion of ‘motherhood’ in the peace and anti-nuclear movement, objecting to an almost automatic, ‘natural’ linkage between motherhood and peace. Two aspects of their criticism are particularly important.

First, women had become conscious of themselves as a subject – not a powerless object – of history. It made them aware of women’s active contribution in the Asia-Pacific War. As we saw above, women played an important role in the peace and anti-nuclear movement in post-war Japan, because they realised that war causes destruction. Especially because women experienced the war on the ‘home front’, they just had to endure it like a natural disaster, which is indicated by the title of the statue in Hiroshima. That victimhood had been fortified by the notion of motherhood (that is, women to “bear and care”). Feminists question women’s self-recognition as a victim¹¹. They have argued that the peace activism in the name of

⁹ Kansha Taeko, *Mada maniau no nara (If you make it in time)* [Jiyusha, 1987] (甘蔗珠恵子『まだまにあうのなら—私の書きたいちばん長い手紙』地湧社、1987年)

¹⁰ Kansha Taeko, Soredemo ‘mada maniau no nara’ (Still ‘if you make it in time’), <http://www.jiyusha.co.jp/topics.html> (accessed on August 13, 2019)

¹¹ Kano Masanao, *Gendai nihon joseishi: feminizumu wo jiku to shite (Contemporary Japanese women’s history: focusing on feminism)* [Yuhikaku, 2004] (鹿野政直『現代日本女性史：フェミニズムを軸として』(有斐閣、2004年) 74.

mothers has functioned to conceal the nation's war responsibility to some extent, considering the history of the mothers who had collaborated with the authorities to promote war and had sent their sons to the battlefield. Symbolically, a feminist group had planned a demonstration on December 8, 1970, on the day of the Pearl Harbor Attack, Japan's surprise aerial attack on the U.S. naval base in Hawaii in 1941, stating that 'today, on the day Japan entered the Pacific War, we shall swear to deny the past women who were carried away by the slogan "Give birth and multiply" lacking an independent self, to put an end to the history of women as always discriminated and invaded, and to stand for the liberation of women's life, sexuality, and reproduction'¹².

This was in tandem with the demand of the youth movement in the 1960s and 70s that Japan take historical responsibility for war and colonialism. While Japan was involved in the Vietnam War and invested its capital in Asian countries, women had to recognise their past complicity with Japan's invasions and colonialism¹³. In general, the younger generation of the time called out the older generation to express their thoughts about Japan's role in the war and during invasions in Asia, and problematised the post-war historiography in which Japan described itself as a loser and a victim of two nuclear bombings and the occupation by the Allied Forces (the U.S. forces). The victimhood of the nation was symbolised by the figures of mothers and children. American historian Lisa Yoneyama wrote that in the literature about the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, fear for the future of children has manifested deeply as a symbol of maternity, in which mothers and children are treated as a homogeneous subject. The sublimation of motherhood enabled the dominant discourse to remember Hiroshima as a hope for future peace, detached from the responsibility for history, while having erased women's corporeality. Yoneyama calls this effect the 'feminization of memory'¹⁴. In other words, using the young female figure in order to stress the innocence and victimhood of the national community, post-war Japan has ignored the reality of each protagonist of the history of war and the fragility of human bodies, so that it could be a victim collectively.

Gender-based division of labour

The feminism in the 1970s also questioned gender relations. To the younger generation which was actively involved in the movement, getting married and becoming a housewife did not seem like suitable options, but seemed obligatory to a great extent. Through problematizing the concept of a nuclear family, women realised that the nuclear family was substantially institutionalised in the post-war society. It did not liberate them from old patriarchy, but brought in a new form of pa-

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The recognition, at the same time, made them aware of their husbands' 'sex tourism' in Asia; additionally, with regard to this, feminists should reconsider the history of Japanese colonialism and its gender violence.

¹⁴ Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima traces: time, space and the dialectics of memory* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 188-97.

triarchy to support economic growth. During the economic revival after the Second World War, exceptionally dedicated and hard-working male employees were called ‘corporate warriors’. Housewives, thus, were required to support their husbands by assuming the role of warriors on another front, the ‘home front’¹⁵. Gender normativity was institutionalised in the education system; for example, from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, the home economics course (learning how to cook, sew, clean and manage the family budget) was compulsory in secondary education only for girls, for ‘cultivating awareness for the mission of motherhood’, according to one of the teachers promoting home economics at school. Female editor Handa Tatsuko wrote in 1977 that the intention to force the gender-based division of labour conceals the contempt for domestic labour due to its lack of commercial value in the capitalist society¹⁶.

Since then, with all such questioning and rethinking, the feminist activists have become very sceptical about identifying women merely with the role of mothers as child-bearer/care-giver, because such identification focuses too much on women’s ‘traditional’ reproductive function. They were sceptical about the emphasizing of ‘motherhood’ of the movement by mass media and by the participants and supporters of the movement themselves. What is a matter of great concern for feminists is that the notion of motherhood with regard to the peace and anti-nuclear movement draws to some extent on the conservative gender role, which they harshly criticise because it is detrimental to the women’s liberation movement.

The limit and the potentiality of ‘motherhood’. Women’s ambiguous power

After the Fukushima accident, feminist concerns regarding emphasizing motherhood in the anti-nuclear movement invited criticism from people within and close to the movement. Some disapproved of the lack of respect for ‘mothers’ among those feminists’ who had expressed their disapproval of the return of the essentialist interpretation of motherhood, as if the feminists were the obstacles for innocent women who bravely stood up against the authorities. Those who criticised feminists in this way never agreed with the government policy on nuclear power, and apparently showed respect for the women in the movement, but they could not understand the complexity of feminist concerns. The reason is the general tendency of discrimination against women and a deep-rooted misogyny in the largely male-centred leftist movement.

On the other hand, feminists themselves might fail to articulate their concerns. What is the problem in talking about peace and the opposition to the use of nuclear energy in terms of ‘motherhood’? We should remember the feminist criticism about the relationship between motherhood and war responsibility: what is concealed when the conventional conception of motherhood is used to make the movement acceptable to the public? Peaceful motherhood narrative was appropri-

¹⁵ Kano 2004, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85-6.

ated by the dominant discourse to transform the national history into a victimhood story which concealed Japan's various aggressions during colonialism and war. This function of negation can work for the anti-nuclear movement as well.

This is proved paradoxically by what happened after the Fukushima accident. As for women's struggle against nuclear politics, ranging from demonstrations to everyday resistance, it was unanimously looked down upon and attacked in different ways by the authorities and mass media. The then governor of Tokyo contemptuously tweeted: 'You housewives who don't work [outside the home] should go out into the world to do a part-time job or something. Then you will understand math and science. You don't have to scare the children' (April 2011). In his illogical and irrational words – even though he himself has accused women for their logical and rational incapability – we can see two aspects, contradicting and complementing each other. On the one hand, by treating women as stupid mothers, he tried to ignore some serious questions raised by women regarding health issues caused by radiation in particular, and to reduce their influence in the society. On the other hand, as far as a definite health risk exists, even if he himself and other similar people hate to acknowledge it, someone must show concern for those who are vulnerable – the children and the elderly – and this responsibility is still assumed by 'mothers'. They belittle 'mothers', but still want women to be caregivers for their own convenience, that is, as an unwaged worker for reproduction. In this context, thus, the concept of 'motherhood' is negatively appropriated by the dominant discourse in order to represent the nuclear incident as something to be overcome by rationality and calmness while ignoring state responsibility for the incident. To do so, it is desirable that women stay passive and remain within their social boundary, without becoming active in the realm of men-politics.

The limit and potentiality of motherhood. Now we should consider the limit and potentiality of using the concept of motherhood.

As discussed above, the anti-nuclear movement in the name of mothers is faced with a dilemma. It functions to reveal a problem, but also to deny a part of it. Moreover, the role of care-giver essential for living in the nuclear age is still assigned to women. In that sense, whether praising or belittling women in action, women are expected to provide care and practice self-sacrifice. When women voluntarily take it upon themselves to protect children and ensure a better future, this should be welcomed too. This is an issue with the ethics of care. As Sandra Lee Bartky warned about Carol Gilligan's seminal theory¹⁷, in emphasizing women's ability to care for others, there is certainly a risk of strengthening the existing gender-based division of labour, in which women are only expected to serve others and value themselves through men's values, losing their own sense of self¹⁸. In my

¹⁷ Carol Gilligan, *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982].

¹⁸ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 104-9.

view, if the important work of care is assigned only to the female gender role, the broader society may not contribute to it, despite the issue of the use of nuclear power being obviously relevant not only to the mothers, or women and children, but to everyone. If the care-giver is left without being cared for, it will harm the individual and the community. Who cares for women caring for others? When the dominant discourse uses the rhetoric of motherhood to represent the national community, it doesn't particularly consider women, who are a part of the community and humans. The use of the concept of motherhood by women themselves can result in self-alienation.

Yet, the attitude of the then governor of Tokyo shows the power of women's actions. Women's words and actions, which are based on their living experience, have had a certain influence on the people who are somewhat worried about the use of nuclear energy and the effects of radiation. Many groups of mothers are still active in negotiating with schools and municipalities to address the issue of children's health and support the mothers and children who had evacuated the contaminated area voluntarily¹⁹, that is, without any subsidy, and also those who have to live in the contaminated area for some reason. Women feel they have the right to make these demands as mothers, especially when they are against the politics and the general tendency of the society. In 1954, 1986, and 2011, Japanese women were encouraged to publicly oppose the nuclear politics as 'mothers', while they were (and are) socially deprived of the right to speak loudly.

Since the 1950s, the women's peace and anti-nuclear movement have always been getting tangled with the conception of motherhood; and since the 1970s, feminists have had concerns about this phenomenon. After tracing the relationship between the concept of 'motherhood' and feminism with regard to the peace and anti-nuclear movement in post-war Japan, I believe that it is important for feminists to value appropriately how a concept which belonged to the *private* sphere has generated historical *public* meanings in two directions: in its normative function and revolutionary function. The latter in particular has the potential to change the private into the public, and to make women not homogeneous but a cooperative unity. It is necessary in order to discuss what nuclear power really means to human beings. The feminist voice should be heard to understand how gendered values have prevented society from contemplating the nuclear issue, and have harmed society both physically and intellectually.

¹⁹ The government had designated the special areas to be evacuated (20-kilometre radius from the incident site) in March 2011, but there are lots of 'hot spots' outside these areas. Some of the population living outside the special areas decided to evacuate by themselves – they were often mothers and children only. Since then the special areas have been gradually reduced according to the return policy.



Figure 1: Sit-in at the Ministry of Economy, October 2011

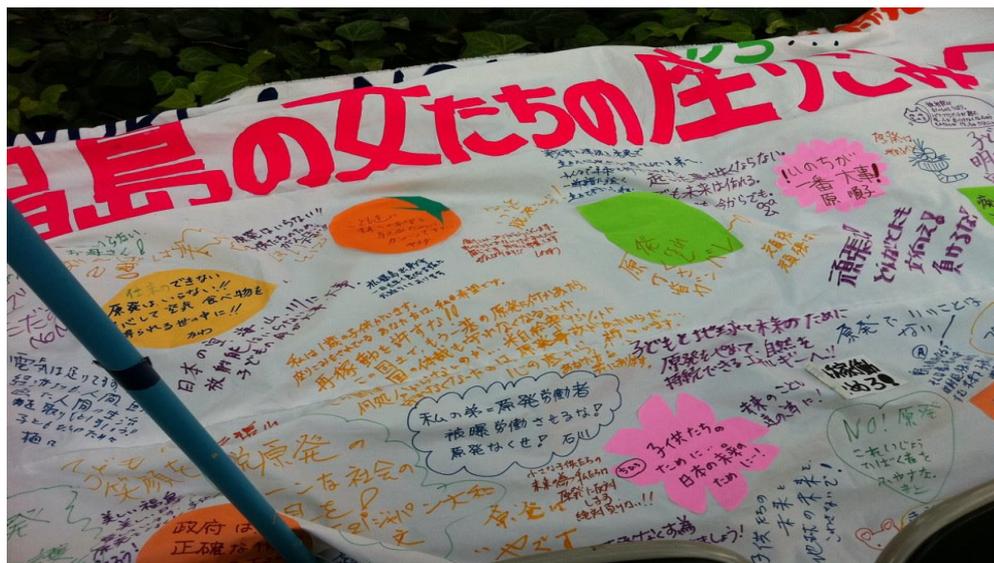


Figure 2: The participants of the sit-in write their thoughts on the banner. These banners read 'Children's lives matter', 'I have a child of one-year-old', 'I am a mother of small children. I am against nuclear energy', 'For children, for the future of Japan', 'For children, earth and the future, stop nuclear power, move to sustainable energy'