

Fukushima nuclear disaster and the violation of women's and children's human rights

Kendra Ulrich, Senior Global Energy Campaigner with Greenpeace Japan, summarizes key themes in her new report, 'Unequal Impact: Women's & Children's Human Rights Violations and the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster' (1)

NM839.4623 The 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear catastrophe may feel like ancient history in world constantly bombarded with news of another tragedy or disaster. But for those who were impacted by the worst nuclear disaster in a generation, the crisis is far from over. And it is women and children that have borne the brunt of human rights violations resulting from it, both in the immediate aftermath and as a result of the Japan government's nuclear resettlement policy. (1)

Japan has ratified multiple international treaties that recognise the right to health as a fundamental human right. It is defined as the "enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health," and includes the right to information and participation as integral tenets of upholding this right. (2) Individuals must be able to make informed choices about their health and influence policy decisions that affect them. But in the wake of the accident, unaddressed issues with Japan's nuclear policy and emergency planning, which the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights had warned the government about in 2001, led to the direct violation of women's and children's rights. (3)

And while the injustices faced by women and children in the immediate aftermath of the disaster were the result of policy failure and legislative inaction for a decade prior, the violations of their human rights resulting from the resettlement policy that has been rolled out under current Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are calculated and deliberate.

Fukushima-impacted women were faced with significantly greater obstacles in coping with the impacts of the disaster according to their own wishes due to a yawning gender gap in Japanese society. In fact, in the most recent ranking of the 34 OECD countries on gender wage gap, Japan was one of the bottom three with only South Korea and Estonia ranking lower. (4)

Despite these financial and social barriers, many women separated from or even divorced husbands who chose to stay in the contaminated region. They evacuated with only their children, in an effort to protect them. But they continue to face a greater risk of poverty and are more vulnerable to financial pressures. And it is just these financial vulnerabilities that the Abe Government is exploiting now. Thousands of Fukushima survivors from outside the designated zones will be stripped of their housing support in March 2017. The government is also moving forward with lifting evacuation orders in some of the more heavily contaminated areas in March and April of this year, even though radiation levels still far exceed long-term decontamination targets. (5) Those from areas where orders are lifted will lose compensation payments next year.

According to the most recent government data from October 2016, thousands of those losing housing support this month had nowhere else to go. They are at risk of homelessness. This means that some people may be forced to return to contaminated areas, even though they do not want to. That is not only a direct violation of their rights under international treaty obligations, but also violates Japanese domestic law. In June 2012, the National Diet – Japan's legislature – unanimously passed the 'Nuclear Disaster Victims Support Act.' The law clearly defines the government's commitments to Fukushima disaster survivors – including the provision of full support as long as it is necessary, the right of victims to freely choose where to live, and the obligation to consider the greater vulnerability of pregnant women and children.

To be clear, the resettlement is a cynical effort to avoid a long-term exclusion zone, like the one near Chernobyl, which serves as a constant reminder that a major nuclear disaster causes irreparable damage to vast areas of land. Both in Japan and globally, the industry has been desperate to create a false reality that the contamination can be cleaned up and people's lives can return to normal.

Massive investments were made in so-called 'decontamination'. Evacuated areas, where there is little chance for success, were prioritised. This also meant that areas where people were still living and decontamination could have made a real impact on reducing exposures, were not. As a result, hot spots in these populated areas continue to be found years after the disaster.

In Iitate, which lies 30-50 km northwest of the reactor site and was heavily contaminated in the disaster, decontamination efforts are extremely limited in scope and success. Though the Ministry of Environment website declares the decontamination of Iitate 100% completed, in reality, only 24% of Iitate has even been touched (5,600 hectares 'decontaminated' out of a total municipal area of 23,013 hectares). The remaining 76% of Iitate remains heavily contaminated mountainous forests which cannot be decontaminated, and will pose the threat of recontamination of the decontaminated areas for the foreseeable future. (6) Evacuation orders in much of Iitate will be lifted by the end of this month.

While exposure to ionizing radiation poses a risk to all people, studies of atomic bomb survivors (7) and medical radiation exposures (8, 9, 10) clearly show that women and children are much greater risk for suffering health effects from it. The right to health includes the right to participation, yet women are woefully underrepresented in decision-making bodies for both the 'reconstruction' and emergency planning. Thus, their ability to see their concerns and needs reflected in policy decisions is quite low. But women have not been silent victims in this whole grossly unjust system. What political processes have denied them – a mechanism to participate in the decisions that affect them – they have pursued in the courts instead. Fukushima mothers who evacuated are living all across Japan, and thousands are plaintiffs in lawsuits to fight for continuation of housing support, fair compensation, accountability on the part of TEPCO and the government for the disaster, and even criminal cases against TEPCO.

They have been at the forefront of organising resistance – from marches to nonviolent direct actions. In the face of impossible odds, they have truly shown stunning resiliency and leadership. And we, as international community, stand with them. We are calling on the Abe government to take urgent action to protect Fukushima-impacted women's and children's human rights.

We have sent a joint letter with Japanese civil society organizations to the UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteurs asking that they assess the current situation of Fukushima survivors. We will also be submitting comments to the UN Universal Periodic Review of Japan on the plight of Fukushima victims. And we will continue to fight beside them for their rights, for justice, and for a healthy, sustainable nuclear-free future.

Greenpeace is asking people to sign an online petition calling on the Japanese government to provide fair compensation and housing support, and to be fully transparent about the radiation risks.

<https://act.greenpeace.org/page/6288/petition/1>

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