

## Gender and political participation in post-3/11 Japan

Phoebe Holdgrün and Barbara Holthus



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## **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the triple disaster of March 11, 2011, concerned parents throughout Japan formed over 300 social movement organizations nationwide for the protection of children from radiation. Especially mothers have become active within that organizational network. For many of them, it is their first time to become politically active. Their activism runs counter to the public discourse, which more so than ever constructs and idealizes mothers as “*silent* protectors of the family”. Motherhood and political activism are opposing each other in these constructs, yet are intricately linked with each other as well.

For two years, we conducted fieldwork among members of one Tokyo-based civil society organization, in order to analyze the strategies of participation of Japanese mothers and to examine how gender roles are played out between mothers and their “opponents”, all of them male representatives of “the state”. We evaluated the findings within the conceptual framework of social capital and advocacy. We find that the group members build up strong social capital but remain at a weak level of advocacy regarding their interaction with local authorities. This seemingly weak advocacy is however a desired state of movement action chosen by mothers who deliberately pursue a strategy of small but long-term approach.

## **Keywords:**

Japan, March 11, political participation, social movements, motherhood, gender roles, civil society.

# Gender and political participation in post-3/11 Japan

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We would like to thank the members, all of them busy moms and many of them employed, of the *Chiyoda-ku kodomo mamorukai* for letting us into their group, for sharing their concerns with us and for their patience in explaining us in detail about their activities. Furthermore we would like to thank our interns Antje Bieberstein, Annika Brandenburg, Marcus Hinselmann, Davina Pick, Jochen Rehmert and Michael Wingers for their research assistance.

\*German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo (DIJ), Jochi Kioizaka Bldg. 2F, 7-1 Kioicho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-0094, e-mail: [holdgruen@diptokyo.org](mailto:holdgruen@diptokyo.org)

\*\*University of Vienna, Institute of East Asian Studies/Japanese Studies, Spitalgasse 2, Hof 2, Tür 2.4., 1090 Vienna, e-mail: [barbara.holthus@univie.ac.at](mailto:barbara.holthus@univie.ac.at)

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Contact Authors: Dr. Phoebe Holdgrün (DIJ)  
holdgruen@dijtokyo.org  
Dr. Dr. Barbara Holthus  
Barbara.holthus@univie.ac.at

ドイツ日本研究所

Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

7-1 Kioicho

Jochi Kioizaka Bldg. 2F

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102 0094

Tel: +81 3 3222 5077

Fax: + 81 3 3222 5420

[www.dijtokyo.org](http://www.dijtokyo.org)

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## 1. Introduction

Koikari (2013), in her analysis of the gendering of public disaster preparedness discourses in Japan after the triple disaster of March 11, 2011 finds these discourses to tie women closely to the “national recovery” and make them the ones responsible to prepare their families for any future disaster. These “assignments” stem from a gendered understanding of women’s roles as mothers taking care of domestic issues, and the discourses construct the ideal of mothers as protectors of the home and as defenders of the family. But while gender plays a significant role when it comes to distributing assignments and making families shoulder it, on the side of the “state” however, Saito (2012: 265) critiques particularly local governments to have failed in the implementation of “a gender perspective in emergency planning and response”, both in the responses to the 1995 Hanshin earthquake in Kobe as well as the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake.

With Koikari (2013) to focus on public discourses of disaster recovery and preparedness, drilling mothers to protect their families against *future* natural and man-made disasters, the impact of the current risks of radiation is mostly left out. Yet some widely publicized research, even though not undisputed, considers internal and external radiation exposure as negatively affecting particularly children. Thus many parents in Japan are concerned about food safety and environmental problems including radiation, but among them a gender gap is clearly distinguishable, suggesting mothers to be significantly more concerned than fathers (Holthus 2013; see also Holthus 2014).<sup>1</sup> So when mothers in Japan are constantly reminded of their important role as “protectors of the family” through the state and public discourse, some of them see not only the future possibility of a major earthquake. Many also see the current radiation in food products and playgrounds as a danger from which to protect their children, but judge the protecting measures by the national and local governments as insufficient. Consequently, a considerable number of parents, especially mothers, have become active within the larger social movement of post March 11, demanding stricter protection policies and are closely monitoring government actions. We find that

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted here are the results from our nationwide study on parental well-being, which was conducted in early 2012. Among the more than 2000 mothers and fathers (from non-identical households) surveyed, more than 70 percent of mothers and 55 percent of fathers answered to be fearful about issues of radiation and food safety.

particularly mothers have become active out of their wish to fulfill their “proper” role as mothers and to protect their children. By doing so, they however find themselves in a difficult position: They are to fulfill the role of protector of the family yet are not supposed to be vocal about their desire to protect their family, respectively their children, against radiation, as that is outside the zone of “appropriate behavior” as consensually agreed upon in public discourse and in the sense of the state understood as national and local authorities, meaning that (1) the status quo of protection against radiation measures is sufficient and food products on the market are safe (Ikeda 2013: 168, Dudden 2012: 355), and (2), mothers should protect their families, but not go as far as to question authorities.

Holthus (2013) has argued that Japanese mothers (and also fathers) in post-3/11 Japan in regards to their reactions about the dangers of radiation can be categorized into one of four types: the “radicals”, the “openly concerned”, the “secretly concerned”, and the “not concerned”. The “radicals”, labeled as such by some of the “openly concerned” women, are the ones participating openly in street demonstrations, one of the most visible forms of social protest. These mothers, together with the “openly concerned” see radiation risks as severe and are trying their utmost to protect their children by taking action.<sup>2</sup> The “openly concerned” distinguish themselves from the “radicals” by not demonstrating but rather by using different methods and hoping for even greater effect of their activities. It is these mothers, the “radicals” and the “openly concerned” that have joined forces in over 300 newly formed social movement organizations, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, by founding the “National Network of Parents to Protect Children from Radiation” (*Kodomotachi o hōshanō kara mamoru zenkoku nettowāku*). Of these organizations, around half are to be found in the larger Tokyo area (Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, Ibaraki, Kanagawa).

We want to gain insight into how mothers, concerned about radiation, manage to balance their activities in their fight against radiation while at the same time striving to fulfill their mother role appropriately. Of special interest for us is the group of “openly concerned” mothers actively fighting against the risks of radiation in social

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<sup>2</sup> The “secretly concerned” might be equally concerned, yet for various reasons are hiding their concerns from others. Only “in secrecy”, away from the watchful eyes of others in their PTA network for example, do they dare to share their fears and concerns, because without a venue to vent, their fears usually remain “bottled up”. The “not concerned” parents believe in the mainstream public discourse of foods to be tested and safe.

movement groups, which have formed since March 11, 2011 and which are part of the largely “invisible” (Steinhoff 2011) or maybe better “overlooked” parts of civil society, because they do not belong to the more visible group of “radicals”. Our aim is to research how gender influences participation in such groups and the interaction of “openly concerned” mother activists. Our leading research question is how gender roles are played out between mothers and their “opponents”, all of them male representatives of “the state”, such as (local) authorities or assemblymen. The mothers of one small organization of “openly concerned mothers” within the national network, the *Chiyoda-ku kodomo mamorukai* (“The Chiyoda group to protect the children”, CKMK), are the focus of our study. They take on the role of “protectors of the home” yet veer from the obedient mother ideal as described by Koikari (2013) by having founded a group to communicate with other like-minded mothers about the dangers of radiation from the Fukushima Dai’ichi Nuclear Power Plant meltdowns. These mothers are trying to protect their families in ways beyond what the national and local governments desire them to do by demanding reactions of the authorities and by contradicting official statements on safety of food and environment, leading to struggles between these women and (local) authorities.

We analyze this struggle and the strategies of participation of Japanese mothers by referring to the concepts of social capital and advocacy, as used on the macro level by Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka (2012) in the context of civil society groups in Japan and the 3/11 disaster. Strong advocacy and the accumulation of social capital are seen as desirable features for civil society groups. Yet Pekkanen (2006: 183) points out that many groups have only weak advocacy, with women’s organizations perceived as the weakest. In our case study of one civil society organization of mostly women, we investigate how macro findings of strong social capital and weak advocacy apply on the micro level, as we find civil society much more diversified than only a macro level study would suggest.

Within the CKMK group, we conducted interviews with members and engaged in participant observation in numerous of the group’s monthly meetings between June 2012 and May 2014. For this paper we have put a particular focus on their interactions with local officials and elected politicians whom they met in order to voice their concerns about radiation.

The paper starts with a brief summary of existing research on the mother role in Japan, research on motherhood in regards to political participation, and the state and changes of civil society in post-3/11 Japan (Section 2). Section 3 explains our theoretical approach by using the concepts of social capital and advocacy. Section 4 briefly introduces the organization we study (CKMK). Section 5 presents findings from our fieldwork in regards to social capital building and the achievement of advocacy. We pay particular attention to the strategies employed by the group members within their felt restrictions to gendered patterns of action. For an evaluation in regards to the wider civil society, the strategies employed by the group members are of particular interest. Section 6 concludes this paper, embedding our case study within Japan's wider civil society.

## **2. Literature review**

We draw on two areas of research, namely (1) gender role bias and its implications for the mother role in Japanese society, particularly in regards to political participation, (2) civil society and social movements in Japan after March 11, with a particular focus on gender, motherhood and disaster.

### **2.1 Motherhood in Japan**

Motherhood in Japan has been and still is instrumentalized by interests of government and business (Holloway 2010, Holloway and Nagase 2014) and has been reinterpreted throughout time, as Wöhr (2013) points out:

[...] it has become clear that gendered categories like the “mother,” the “housewife,” or the “scientist” have no inherent meaning, or essence but emerge, disappear, re-emerge, and shift meanings in accordance with the larger context of the gender order, which is, again, closely tied to other systems and discourses like that of the nation state or the citizen (Wöhr 2013: 213).

Ever since the middle-class ideal of “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) within a rapidly changing Japan on its way to becoming a modern, industrialized nation-state during the Meiji Era (1868-1912), and culminating during the era of high economic growth in the 1960s to beginning 1970s, women were ideally to become full-time

housewives and mothers after marriage, excluded from the labor market, with husbands working full-time. This gender role allocation aided the male population in their ability to work hard and to sustain high economic growth. Middle-class women were part of the workforce only for a short time before marriage and childbirth, or in low-paid irregular part-time jobs after their childrearing years.

Despite the fact that we still find an M-curve of female employment in Japan, with the majority of mothers quitting their jobs for a certain period of time before reentering the job market, the retreat from the labor market has become shorter over time. Yet the impact of the low birthrate (2012 at a TFR of 1.41) (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2013, Table 2.6) and its implications for society and economy has called the attention of politicians and experts to motherhood once again. On the one hand, women are accused of not bearing their responsibilities to become mothers (Holloway 2010: 200). On the other hand, the neo-liberal politics of the currently ruling LDP party is implementing measures, such as child care leave regulations or efforts for work-life-balance measures, in order to tap into the still widely unused reserves of Japan's female workforce. Yet expectations on child-rearing remain high and are still mostly put on mothers rather than on both parents, who also continue to shoulder the bigger share of household duties. Thus, the current perceptions of motherhood have to be understood within the gendered structure of society and within an institutional framework that makes it difficult for women (as well as for men) to enjoy active parenting and full-time regular employment at the same time (Holloway and Nagase 2014).

Holloway (2010) shows that the way how motherhood is lived depends on individual dispositions, cultural imaginations, and an institutional frame that enables or disables mothers to participate in other realms of society and public life. Individual dispositions can contribute to confidence and positive self-evaluation – or to a deep sense of insecurity, anxieties and feelings of low self-efficacy. Cultural imaginations such as the “ten commandments of the good mother” prescribe behavioral patterns: a “good mother” should devote plenty of time and energy into child rearing and make no use of technologies like ready-made baby food, but, instead, cook all by herself. A “good mother” should sacrifice herself and go through hardships. She should also be cheerful at all times and regulate her emotions (Jolivet 1997, Sasagawa 2006, Holloway, 2010: 197).

Local and nationwide, formal and informal institutions define and shape the understanding of good motherhood (Sasagawa 2006) as well. Holloway recognizes a “strong alliance between government and corporate interests and its role in shaping the lives of men and women” (2010: 204). Sasagawa (2006) investigates how government and local communities have begun providing support centers and services through which the government educates mothers on how to be a good mother. This system is reinforced once the children enter the Japanese education system: Mothers are kept busy and involved as they are supposed to equip their children with handmade goodies or carefully cooked and arranged lunch boxes and to take their turn as PTA officers. The relation between school and mothers is top-down oriented, and mothers are usually obedient and pursue their PTA tasks in order to ensure good relations between their children and the teachers (Sasagawa 2006, Jolivet 1997, Holloway 2010).

## **2.2 Motherhood and political participation**

The situation of women and mothers within the public realm in Japan, such as the world of politics, also shows a significant gender bias which becomes evident in international comparison: In the “Global Gender Gap Report 2013” Japan ranks only 105 of 136 countries (World Economic Forum 2013). Access for women and mothers to politics is particularly difficult due to “institutional and contextual facilitators” (Eto 2005: 312), such as the electoral system, the distribution of resources, and a socio-cultural background that does not encourage women to run for office.<sup>3</sup> Participation of women in decision making processes remains low – 7.9 per cent of the members of the House of Representatives are female, and 18.2 per cent of the representatives of the House of Councilors are women (December 2012) (NDKSK 2013). LeBlanc denotes that politics and the daily life of housewives seem to be “separately constructed, incompatible worlds” (LeBlanc 1999: 85) that trigger feelings of distance (1999: 75). Political opinions are seen as a “*private luxury*” (LeBlanc 1999: 70). However, political participation is more than seeking to run for political office. Women often become aware and concerned of political problems only through their role as mothers taking care of their children, and as such

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<sup>3</sup> Further literature on women and political participation in Japan see for example Iwamoto 2007, 2001, Ōgai 2001, Pharr 1981, Takeda 2006, Vogel 1995, Gelb and Estevez-Abe 1998, Martin 2011, 2008, Mae 2000, Gaunder 2007.

motherhood and the mother role have a considerable impact on motivations and ways to become active (Eto 2005: 317-318, 328). Yet the mother role also hinders political participation:

[...] when a woman's comments or actions were perceived as unnecessarily controversial, her child could suffer from his mother's reputation for making trouble" (LeBlanc 1999: 70).

The hegemonic mother role leaves mothers only limited spare time. In addition, mothers tend to avoid possible criticism of their lifestyles that might arise from participation in political activism, and fall back on themselves and their families (LeBlanc 1999: 80).

### **2.3 Mothers in social movement organizations against radiation**

Before March 11, it was said that civil society had weakened structures and that protest culture in Japan had more or less died ever since the late 1960s and early 1970s Ampo protests and the student movement (Aldrich 2008). Yet an "invisible" civil society still existed when March 11 hit (Steinhoff 2011). Therefore the fast growing movement against nuclear energy after 3.11 cannot only be characterized as a spontaneous act, consisting of many remobilized civil society members and those becoming active for the first time in their lives. The new wave of protests, despite being small in relation to the overall population of the country, has had surprising numbers – for example demonstrations with an estimated number of 170.000 participants (*JT* 25.07.2012). Feelings of distrust, anger and insecurity, and failures of the government were reported as strong incentives for becoming active (Dudden 2012, Holdgrün 2012, Reiher 2012).

Oguma (2012), in deciphering the history and layers of the anti-nuclear movement, points out that in post-Chernobyl Japan in the 1980s, well-educated housewives became a new group on the stage of anti-nuclear activism in Japan, with its members focusing on food safety and radiation pollution (see also Wöhr 2013, Takeda 2006). The concern about children's health made many mothers become activists (Sakurai 1990: 138, cited after Eto 2005: 317) and motherly duties were voiced (Takeda 2006: 191–192). Eventually, concerns over Chernobyl slowly faded, only to be taken up again by a large number of parents in 2011.

Mothers taking on an important role in anti-nuclear activism is not unique to Japan. Culley and Angelique (2003) examined gendered roles of anti-nuclear activists at the Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear power plant, observing that gender “acts as both a barrier and a facilitator to activism” (2003: 447). They show that the women felt originally strongly constrained due to gender roles and their lack of knowledge about nuclear energy when they first took up political activism. However, by intensively studying nuclear issues, their ability to act and speak up increased and they overcame such barriers (2003: 452).<sup>4</sup> Motherhood itself served as facilitator by being the core reason for becoming active in the first place and also for continuing with their activities for a long time. Furthermore, in the course of being political activists, the mothers’ sense of self was positively affected: They felt more autonomous and stronger. Thus we see that gender can affect political activism, especially in the aftermath of disaster.

The participation of parents and mothers in particular, engaging in social protests or other social movement activities on the issues of nuclear energy and radiation, particularly food-related concerns, has been treated elsewhere (Morioka 2013, Slater 2011, Sand 2012, Holdgrün 2012, Reiher 2012), however, we aim to contribute to the literature with an in-depth analysis of one of these groups.

### **3. Theoretical framework: Social capital and advocacy**

The fast blossoming of protests and new social movement organizations in response to the triple disaster of March 11, 2011 triggered diverse evaluations about their possible longevity. The movement has also been called “hydrangea revolution” (*ajisai kakumei*) by referring to the Jasmin revolution in the Middle East (Obinger 2013: 589), and by comparing it to the flower’s characteristics: having no clear center, but being an accumulation of many small blossoms (aka social movement organizations) which will quickly wither back into non-existence (Hasegawa 2013). Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka (2012), who define civil society in Japan as the “organized non-state, non-market sector that exists above the family and the individual” (2012: 78), have a slightly different evaluation, cautiously seeing signs of change towards more influence. They point out that 3.11 revealed strengths and

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<sup>4</sup> Aldrich (2012a, 2012b) points to acquiring knowledge (“citizen science”) in post-3/11 Japan as important for all activists, regardless of gender.

weaknesses of civil society in Japan, namely strong social capital and weak advocacy. They argue that a civil society exerting stronger influence could have had a positive effect possibly contributing to prevent the triple disaster (Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka 2012: 82). As such, a strong monitoring of actions of the government and related organizations is described as a desirable feature. In Section 4, we take up the concepts of social capital and advocacy and apply them to our analysis of the members and activities of the *Chiyoda-ku kodomo mamoru kai*, to understand if this mothers' group can be equally described as accumulating high social capital for its members but "failing" in regards to being weak in exerting advocacy.

### **3.1. Social capital**

According to Putnam, social capital "refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995: 67), and social capital can, as he highlights, "improve the efficiency of society" (Putnam 1993a: 167, cf. Braun). While Putnam emphasizes that social capital, generated within a certain network, can lead to a positive contribution for society in general, Bourdieu understands social capital more as an individual resource (Braun 2001: 5). Bourdieu defines: "Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wayquant 1992: 119). He uses his conception of social capital as tool to analyze questions of social mobility and social exclusion.

Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka (2012: 85-86) describe social capital as "social foundation", developing out of activities such as those taking place within neighborhood organizations or firefighting volunteer groups, activities that clearly paid off during evacuation procedures at the disaster as people risked their lives in order to save others:

These activities encourage local residents to work together and consequently generate social capital (network, trust, reciprocity). This social foundation became crucial in responding to the Tōhoku Earthquake. The high level of social

capital is likely to have maintained general order [...] (Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka 2012: 84).

A more detailed definition of social capital is not offered in their study, but the keywords ‘network’, ‘trust’ and ‘reciprocity’ and the context of this quote indicate that the concept is close to the understanding of social capital by Putnam. For our case study, we understand social capital not as having a direct impact on Japanese society in general, but as resources of individuals – the *mamorukai* members – generated within the social structure of the group network and the larger umbrella organization. Resources such as trust and mutual benefit are generated and applied within, not outside the network – they are “context specific” (Edwards and Foley 1998: 129, see also Coleman 1988). Thus, we refer to the social, not to the economic dimension of social capital (Vogt 2010).

### **3.2. Advocacy**

Whereas Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka (2012) see local civil society groups to have accrued strong social capital, they find nationwide and local organizations in Japan against nuclear power plants to have had only a “weak advocacy role” (2012: 80). The authors argue that these civil society groups in Japan were “ineffective in monitoring or checking government policies or industry excesses” and as such imposed no effective hurdles that may have contributed to preventing the disaster of 3/11 (Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka 2012: 80). Reasons for weak advocacy go back to framing processes and internal struggles among individual anti-nuclear groups, but also to characteristics of Japanese civil society in general, namely the small size of organizations with equally small budgets, membership numbers, professional advocates and a radius of action limited to the local level. Earlier, Pekkanen termed Japanese civil society “members without advocates”, meaning that civil society organizations in Japan have difficulty influencing public discourse and the political process (2006: 179-180, see also Pekkanen 2004):

Japan’s local civil society groups are significant in sustaining social capital and promoting efficient governance. However, its relatively small professional civil society means fewer voices from civil society are heard at the policy level. There are few civil society organizations with the independence and capability to monitor the state, publicize critical perspectives, or propose new policy ideas.

Instead, the influence of the corporate sector and the state are relatively large (Pekkanen 2006: 177).

Again, the authors have not provided a more in-depth definition of the term “advocacy”. In the following, we will focus on the aspect of monitoring and influencing (local) governments, by defining the term according to Elizabeth Reid (2000):

‘Advocacy’ describes a wide range of individual and collective expression for action on a cause, idea, or policy. [...] Advocacy as participation addresses the ways organizations stimulate public action, create opportunities for people to express their concerns in social and political arenas, and build the resources and skills necessary for effective action. [...] It broadly describes the influence of groups in shaping social and political outcomes in government and society (Reid 2000: 1, 4, 6).

Reid lists numerous advocacy activities, such as “influencing public opinion; research for interpreting problems and suggesting preferred solutions; constituent action and public mobilizations; agenda setting and policy design; lobbying; policy implementation, monitoring, and feedback; and election-related activity” (Reid 2000: 1). In a related book, Keck and Sikkink (1998) further strengthen the importance of “information politics” for “network effectiveness” (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 18).

The central role of information in these issues helps explain the drive to create networks. Information in these issue areas is both essential and dispersed. Nongovernmental actors depend on their access to information to help make them legitimate players (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 21).

In section 5, we will take up these elements and analyze the work of the CKMK accordingly.

## 4. Chiyoda-ku kodomo mamorukai: The organization and its activities

This section provides an overview of the founding of the parental organization under investigation, its members, as well as the activities the group has engaged in during its more than two years of existence.

### 4.1. The organization

Within weeks after the March 11, 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and subsequent triple nuclear meltdown at the Dai'ichi Fukushima nuclear power-plant, parents in each of the 23 districts in Tokyo founded an organization – many of these having “*mamorukai*” (“organization to protect”) in their title – specifically trying to protect the children of their district from the dangers of radioactivity. These independently operating “local chapters” are linked through an umbrella organization entitled *NO! Hoshanō “Tokyo rengō kodomo mamorukai”* – “Radiation No! ‘Tokyo Union – Protect Children From Radiation’” (TRKMK 2011). The *Chiyoda-ku kodomo mamorukai* (CKMK) as the parental group of Tokyo’s Chiyoda ward was founded in August 2011. CKMK was one of the last local chapters in Tokyo to be founded. The earliest ward already established its group a month after the disaster, quickly followed by others, and newly established groups peaked in June 2011. The fact that the parents of Chiyoda ward were late in forming their group was explained by two of its founding members to Chiyoda being a comparatively conservative ward at the heart of the inner center of the metropolis Tokyo, housing both the governmental district and the imperial palace (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

CKMK is also part of the “National Network of Parents to Protect Children from Radiation” (*Kodomotachi o hoshanō kara mamoru zenkoku nettowāku*), as mentioned in the introduction, thus making it one group within a large, nationwide network of concerned parents. All of the groups and thus the entire network started their activities only after the nuclear disaster of March 11, 2011, and they built their structures considerably fast.

## 4.2. The founding process and its members

More than two years before March 11, two of the founding members of CKMK met through their children, who were enrolled in the same public daycare center (*hoikuen*) in Chiyoda ward. When both women ended up in PTA positions at that daycare just when the issue came up that the upcoming rebuilding of the daycare center included the abolishment of the adjacent playground, they took up the fight to keep the playground. It was a long fight with many obstacles, such as bullying from other parents, due to their “sticking out” through their verbal confrontations with the local administration. They claim that the other parents shun away from conflict, and in due course labeled the mothers “crazy mothers” and as “monster parents”. Eventually however, their struggle was successful and the newly constructed daycare center still features the playground. It was this experience that built up trust between these two mothers and made them develop a deep friendship through this intense experience of fighting together for a common cause against the authorities.

After the March 11 disaster, when the two women became aware of the radiation pollution, they became scared, as schools, daycare centers, and kindergartens did not provide a place for information exchange among the parents. And once again the women experienced that the majority of parents were keeping quiet and not inquiring about the problems with radioactivity in regards to their children’s food in daycare and schools. When the two women eventually met a few other like-minded, equally worried parents through their children’s playgroups, they discovered that other wards had organized parental groups fighting against the dangers of radiation for the children, whereas in Chiyoda, no such group had formed yet. They felt empowered by the playground fight experience to tackle this new issue, namely radiation, and thus took up the challenge of founding the group. Yet as these women thought to have gotten a bad reputation of being “bothersome” and “noisy” within the local government, they decided to have another mother, unconnected to the earlier issue of the daycare center playground, to stand in as the official head of the CKMK organization for public sake only.

Once the group was officially formed, the first members were recruited from their preexisting networks of friends and acquaintances from their children’s daycare and the earlier struggles there. They mobilized them through informal conversations

about the topic of radiation. The group currently has a total number of about 30 members. Many of them are full-time employed mothers with their children in daycare centers. It is mostly there that the problems with the children possible exposure to radiation arise, as in daycare centers the lunches are provided by the local government. In the eyes of the CKMK members, it is less problematic to have children enrolled in kindergarten/preschools (*yōchien*), which have on average shorter opening hours and do not provide lunches, as the mothers have full control over their children's food intake and thus, children can be much easier protected through giving them "safe" foods. For daycare center children, the parents are dependent on trusting the local government for checking the food for radiation (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

The ultimate goal of CKMK is to protect children's health and future lives. The CKMK organization explicitly distances itself from any kind of political or religious group (CKMK 2011, interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

#### **4.3. *Mamorukai* activities**

The activities of CKMK and other *mamorukai* under the umbrella organization of the Tokyo Union are manifold. Acquisition, exchange and distribution of information are core activities of all *mamorukai* throughout Tokyo: All groups have a website and publish information. Some distribute information about radiation levels that the groups measure themselves in their district, some have downloadable flyers with information such as about "hidden" radiation dangers in the neighborhood, or information about upcoming public events somehow related to radiation dangers or related health concerns. Most of them report about their activities. Regular group meetings provide room for exchanging information and concerns within the local members. Study groups offer opportunities to gather more knowledge. With that, the activities fall into what Keck and Sikkink (1998) have called "information politics", a highly important tool for gaining advocacy among civil society groups and members.

The gathering and exchange of information lays the ground for the other core activity of *mamorukai*: Political activities such as submitting petitions or appeals to their local governments and formal as well as informal meetings with local politicians. These forms of political participation aim at influencing and monitoring

local authorities to have them give priority to the concerns about children's safety (CKMK 2011 and other *mamorukai* homepages).

## 5. Strategies of participation

In this section we analyze the patterns and strategies of participation of the CKMK members. We show whether and how social capital is accumulated through these group activities and make inferences about the group's level of advocacy. We pay particular attention to gender influencing the ways the members interact with local authorities.

### 5.1 Social Capital

#### Network

Starting point for the CKMK's activities were the strong bonds of two of the founding members who had been struggling with the local authorities over a playground some years before getting involved in the *mamorukai*: "Between these two people, relations [*kizuna*] were generated, strong trust relations" (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012). The close connection of these core members builds the foundation for CKMK's activities. It was this relationship of trust that the founders also wanted to create among all members of this new group. When asked about the purpose of the CKMK, one of the leading members replied:

The purpose of our group? If you ponder all by yourself, this can become stress for you and you might get sick. But we meet and we want to let each other understand that we are not alone. If you fight alone, you might give up. But not to give up because here are friends, and to make clear that it is OK to feel afraid – this is a kind of support [the group provides] (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

CKMK managed to form a network of like-minded parents, equally concerned and eager to make a difference in their district, members. One could call this the network on the micro-level. On a larger level, so-called meso-level, the group as a whole is embedded within the Tokyo network of *mamorukai* (as described in section 4). But CKMK as well as the Tokyo network are also part of the countrywide network of parental organizations on the macro-level.

## Trust

Within this multi-layered network the people basically share the same concerns about radioactive contamination and their children's safety. Many of the CKMK mothers articulate that it is difficult to talk to people outside the group about radiation issues, for example with other mothers at their children's school, who might not be equally concerned. The lack of understanding by other, seemingly unconcerned parents, and a perceived lack of thorough information by the local and national government cause grievances and stress for the openly concerned mothers. Thus, the monthly CKMK meetings and mailing lists<sup>5</sup> and other ways to communicate offer a place to vent and become "safe places": Anxieties can be verbalized without holding something back, and one's innermost concerns can be vented. During our participant observation, we even witnessed mothers who suddenly started crying, seemingly because of the stresses related to the health worries through radiation for their children, and a mixture of frustration, fear, and role conflict. Thus this network of like-minded parents can be understood as providing significant psychological support for its members. Trust can be said to be generated through these forms of communication.

## Reciprocity

Within the networks, questions related to contamination issues are asked, discussed and answered and information is distributed, all contributing to mutually benefitting the group members. In the "early days" after 3.11 but still even a year after the founding of CKMK, the members were exchanging information on Geiger counters. They compared effectiveness, precision of measurement, as well as style, weight and size of different devices by different makers. At one meeting in June 2012, when the issue of Geiger counters had come up, eventually almost all mothers took out their counters to show the others. As they said to carry them with them at all times, issues of size and weight, as well as sources for purchase were important information for the members and they all shared their accumulated knowledge. The same goes for information on radiation levels of certain foods. At a meeting in summer 2012, one mother brought a book to share with her fellow CKMK members,

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<sup>5</sup> Exchange via Internet tools is significant as not all mothers attend the monthly meetings. For mothers generating social capital via the internet see Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005).

which listed the information on which vegetable (and other food) is grown by which percentage of radioactive contamination in which prefecture during which month. This allowed the mothers to make inferences as to which vegetables to avoid and to adjust their shopping accordingly. In more or less regular intervals, members report on which bottled soft drink, which are ever so present in Japan, is made in which plant and which uses water that can be considered “safe”, and providing information which is not so readily available and requires sometimes considerable research. One member in particular has put a lot of effort into this, and shares her information with the others.

The members of CKMK have battled numerous small issues over the time of their existence. The group is particularly open to concerns by individual members, which are then becoming the group’s concerns, with the group then working together to improve the situation. In one example, the fear of some about radiation levels of the sandboxes in the public daycare centers, kindergartens und public parks in the district became the entire group’s concern and they successfully lobbied the local government until finally the sandboxes were measured, the measurements made public and the sand with higher contamination levels exchanged. In other instances the sharing of information about how the daycare centers or elementary schools of their own children handle certain issues in regards to the lunches given out to the children empowered other mothers to have arguments to bring forth to lobby their own daycare center to be more flexible and allowing to the concerns and demands of the mothers wanting to protect their children from radiation. This reciprocity, or give-and-take, between the mothers with their different skill sets they bring to the group, is a constant within CKMK.

These and numerous more examples show that the activities of the group strongly built up the three main elements of social capital as described in section 3.1., namely network, trust and reciprocity, among the CKMK members. Gender issues in the accumulation of social capital however are not visible. Except for a couple of fathers, it is only mothers who are present at the monthly group meetings for networking. The mothers are a more or less homogenous group with similarly high education, and they individually already have relatively high social capital through being mothers of children within daycare, kindergarten, or elementary school networks before joining CKMK. Some of the mothers are involved in PTA

assignments; many are working outside their homes and thus also have networks of colleagues.

## 5.2 Advocacy

As described above, the CKMK is a small group within the larger movement of parents against radiation in Japan. It is not highly structured or organized, there are flat or better non-existent hierarchies, and the differences between the members are only in their investment of time and effort for this group. Though almost all of its members are working mothers with a professional background and professional knowledge they can apply to their activities, there is no member working exclusively for the group, but activities go alongside employment, household and child-raising duties. Communication via the group's internal emailing list for example takes place while commuting, in the early morning before work or during weekends. The radius of activities is limited to a very local space within Chiyoda ward, though they are connected to other wards and nationwide through networking activities. Also, CKMK does not have a budget. Membership is for free, and all activities are done with the personal assets of the members – such as using personal computers to create and maintain the website, or expenses for public transport to travel to the local town hall to submit petitions or to meet local officials. Thus CKMK's characteristics of a small membership, lack of professional members, a local radius of action and the absence of a budget can be said to contribute to the group's weak advocacy (Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka 2012). Additionally we found one more significant reason for weak advocacy, which became apparent through the interaction of the CKMK members with local politicians and bureaucrats, which we were able to observe at different events throughout our fieldwork. Meetings and negotiating with local assemblymen and officials are one political activity the mothers engage in more or less frequently, next to writing petitions to the local ward office and keeping up a presence in committee meetings of the local assembly. One of these events shall be described here in more detail in order to highlight how the mothers interact with these authorities.

This meeting took place during the usual monthly meetings of the *mamorukai* members on a Saturday morning in July 2013 in the restaurant of one of the founding members. The local assemblyman, a man in his forties and father of two

young children, was sitting at one broadside of the table and around ten female CKMK members (with some coming and going in between the meeting, due to some mothers' time limitations) gathered at the opposite side, with the restaurant owner acting as a kind of moderator. It had been announced to the CKMK members through the mailing list beforehand that the politician would join the meeting, and this had caused a vivid reaction on the mailing list with many members signaling they wanted to attend.

During the meeting, the mothers explained their concerns and anxieties about radiation in food products, the contaminated soil of playgrounds in kindergartens and daycare centers, and the radiation risks at the summer destination for the school trip of fourth grade elementary school children to the coastline of Chiba, where the children are supposed to swim in the sea and also eat the local produce. One mother with a high-profile professional background with expert knowledge about nuclear energy made her background known while talking to the assemblyman. The politician then began asking for information about safe drinking water and where to shop safe foods, thus consumer concerns that are the topic within CKMK on a regular basis. On the other hand, the *mamorukai* members did not take this opportunity within this rather intimate one-on-one with the politician to themselves ask questions and voice their demands to him as a representative of the local government. Though the CKMK members themselves confirm to us that they want to be watchdogs for the local government and assembly and though they want to have an impact (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012), they did not engage in more structured ways of engagement, such as possibly a written handout with their agenda with things that they want to be done and with proposals about what could be done, or asking questions related to local politics on the issue of radiation. On this and on other occasions as well, they called themselves "just some concerned mothers", though another option would have been to point at the fact that a Tokyo-wide network and a country-wide movement stands behind them. Neither did they mention the existence of a silent crowd of secretly concerned parents. The group did not present itself as a coherent, organized group with specific demands.

Yet a twist occurred when at one point the mother who acted as moderator of the event turned to us, the two present foreign researchers, and told us to ask the politician questions. The CKMK members all knew and welcomed that we were

taking part as researchers – hoping that our work sheds more light on their activities and thus gives them more bargaining power, so instrumentalizing us to a certain degree.<sup>6</sup> Being suddenly in the spotlight, we faced the dilemma of influencing the field to a greater degree than we had imagined. Nevertheless, we decided to ask the politician about how the issue of radiation concerns and children’s safety was handled in the local assembly, and he explained extensively that – in a nutshell – it was not a topic at all. The same evening after the event, a wrap-up of the meeting with the politician was sent over the CKMK mailing list, and this summary highlighted exactly the answers to our questions. Thus, our questions seemingly had elicited information the mothers thought important, but seemingly they themselves had been unable to ask.

The fact that the CKMK members did present themselves in such a cautious way as “just some concerned mothers” goes back to past experiences of some of the founding members who had been active and negotiating with local officials before. At that time, they felt that they stood out as “crazy mamas” and this fell back on them badly:

If you talk to the administration, it is like this. [...] we had no other choice than to make noise. [...] I became a kind of crazy mama, a kind of monster parent. [...] Other people didn’t want to make enemies. They prefer to have good relationships with everyone. [...] Anyway, we thought we should make noise. [...] and there was a lot of bashing against us. This is ‘my long story’ and I will skip this now (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

This experience deeply affected these mothers and they feel that the image of “monster parents” is still clinging to them, similar to what LeBlanc (1999) had pointed out (see above). Thus, this time with their activities with CKMK, they wanted to become active in a different way – not to raise a controversy and avoid having the group members be bashed:

The problem is that we were too noisy [...] [with the other issue]. We got famous. And if we would be representatives, just something like *kureima* [crazy mamas] would appear. And then we will be in an awkward situation. That’s why we thought it might be good to do it a little different [...]. Though we maybe should have been representatives, we were not able to become – it

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<sup>6</sup> More on the dilemmas faced in fieldwork, see de Laine 2000.

was better if we did not become representatives for the [negotiations with] the administration hereafter [...] – to do it smooth – [the administration would have thought:] here they are again! [...] and if our names stand out, other mothers might dislike our organization (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

Though the dispute-experienced founding members would have been most suited as representatives for the CKMK in terms of being outspoken and engaged, all founding members decided to have a young mother of two children become representative instead in order to have a fresh unknown face for negotiations with local officials on the one hand and for sympathizing mothers as optional members on the other hand. The way they had been active before stirred up feelings of inappropriate behavior: “We were told: Why do you write petitions? You are not supposed to complain to those above!” (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012, for the top-down relations between (school) authorities and mothers see also for example Sasagawa 2006).

This experience brought them to try out a different strategy of activities in the newly founded CKMK: not to stir hostile feelings and not to stand out, as otherwise this might fall back on their children and spouses as well as on themselves. They wanted to “get it right” this time. “To get it right” meant to present themselves as “just some mothers” thinking of their children and to keep down the visible level of strategic approach.

Instead, by presenting themselves in such a “docile” way, they stick to recognized gendered mother roles (LeBlanc 1999). They present themselves as politically neutral, rejecting support for any particular political party. We argue that the way how gender and in particular “proper mother” roles are perceived and used in order not to stand out negatively are decisive for lacking advocacy, next to other structural reasons. The CKMK mothers are aware of the contradiction they embody through their activities: They are supposed to fulfill their mother roles and defend their children against all bad (Koikari 2013), but on the other hand, they are almost sure they would face a severe backlash if they are too clearly outspoken and if they stand out with clearly visible political activities. They try to solve this dilemma by framing their own activities in a modest, silent way, thus acting in very stereotypical gender roles on first sight by continuous self-gendering.

At the same time their self-understanding is that they have to observe the local government as watchdogs and get the local authorities to perform measurements of food products and protection against contaminated soil. How do they do that if advocacy seems to have to remain weak if they continue to appear as “just some mothers”? We argue that the CKMK mothers pursue a strategy we term “babysteps towards advocacy”.

### 5.3 A strategy of babysteps

As the CKMK members constantly gender themselves, acting out of their understanding of how the mother role is to be “ideally” performed in society, they pursue a strategy to voice and advocate their concerns that stay within permissible social norms for mothers:

We are not thinking about doing big things like these demonstrations. We just want to protect our own children. It’s just a small request. [...] From the beginning, we have considered to be active on a small level and in the long run. [...] When we started our activities, we [decided] the precondition that we do no political activities and do not support any political party. This does not mean that we are pro-nuclear power, but we also do not reject nuclear power with a loud voice. The things we do might be very small things for some people. In order to do small things, one should not claim big things, but first one should go for small things and get them done. [Goals that we] can reach, [...] that we can handle, that’s what we have thought of at the beginning (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

As a group, they are adverse to political action (though they take up political activities, yet which they do not want to call it that way) and reject taking a clear stand on nuclear power, with this stemming out of their understanding of how they should behave as mothers. They explain their strategy with the terms “*hosoku, nagaku*”: small, but over a long time.<sup>7</sup> This approach includes writing petitions, to be present at the local assembly committee meetings, and to network and negotiate with politicians – but it does not include aggressively asking to get things done nor openly challenging local authorities by becoming visible at demonstrations – like the

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<sup>7</sup> This might be similar to the little by little (“poco a poco”) strategy Wöhr (2013: 221) is referring to.

“radicals” among the concerned parents would do (Holthus 2013). By doing it this “small” way, they act as much as possible within the boundaries of what is appropriate for mothers – making their activities more compatible with their gender role norms. They are aware that this strategy might not directly lead to influencing decision making processes in the short run, but it might lead to sustainable relations with the local administration and government in the long run and will possibly lead to desired policy change, as Pharr has put it: “In a larger sense, however, all political women, no matter how modest their degree of involvement or how carefully they may disguise their activism from any detractors, are agents of change” (Pharr 1981: 14). For example, a part of their strategy is to network with local assemblymen with different party backgrounds on an informal level, for example by inviting them for lunch. In their understanding, assemblymen are crucial in order to get information (interview with member of CKMK, December 20, 2012).

With this strategy of *hosoku nagaku* or “babysteps towards advocacy”, informing politicians with facts on radiation<sup>8</sup> as well as on their motherly concerns is one tactic. The CKMK members themselves obtain new information by the assemblymen and officials in order to spread that knowledge to its members (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The mothers of CKMK make a continuous effort to be present as audience at committee meetings in the local assembly: “If you are present and listen, they have to make an effort” when their cause is discussed (interview with members of CKMK, December 20, 2012). By the simple presence of one or two of them, the committee members would know that there are a group of mothers behind them and this forces the assemblymen to take action. The mothers are fully aware that the problem of radiation is a long-term problem, thus seeing their actions as appropriate. There will be many issues coming up over the years to come, and so they do not want to risk running out of steam if they press ahead too fast in the beginning. Being a mother activist for CKMK is like running a marathon. You have to start with babysteps, go slow, otherwise you will not make it to the finish line, hopefully a life again when the radiation risks are not an issue anymore.

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<sup>8</sup> Their constant accumulation of latest information lays the ground to provide detailed knowledge to politicians.

## 6. Conclusion

Our research question was how gender roles are played out between mothers in social movement organizations to protect their children against radiation and local authorities, and, basically, how mothers participate in the overlooked or invisible parts of civil society after 3/11 in Japan. Do they, as was found with other civil society groups in Japan, have the capabilities to build up strong social capital, yet are not capable of cultivating strong advocacy roles?

Our case study of the organization CKMK and its members, almost exclusively mothers, who feel primarily concerned about radioactive contamination of food products and about contaminated soil such as in playgrounds, find themselves in a dilemma: On the one hand, public discourse and the normative role of the mother in Japanese society make them the ones to protect and defend their children – and willingly so. But on the other hand, they feel it will fall back on them personally, but also on their cause as well as their families, if they raise their voices and become openly active in order to bring (local) government(s) to implement careful measures against radiation to protect their children.

The CKMK mothers, among them some who have experienced a backlash after standing out too much when fighting on another issue years before, deal with this contradiction by framing their own activities in a modest, silent way and by constantly gendering activities when interacting with local assemblymen and local officials – treading the fine line of trying to “fit in” as a “proper” mom while trying to stand up and fight for the safety and health of their children in regards to radiation. By introducing themselves as “just some mothers” who do not have any political aims but who are just concerned about their children, they find a way to articulate concerns while still acting in a way that suits them as mothers.

Going alongside with previous literature on Japanese civil society organizations, our findings show that the members of the group build up strong social capital, while in our case networks, trust and mutual benefit are primarily targeted at members within the organization and their families, not at society beyond the group. We also confirm structural features pointing to weak advocacy, such as a small number of members and activities focusing on the very local level that correspond to the findings of Kawato, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka (2012). The constant self-

gendering that we witnessed when CKMK members interacted with local authorities further contributes to weak advocacy. But our fieldwork has also shown that the CKMK mothers deliberately pursue such a strategy of small but long-term approach, with informal meetings with politicians as an important tool in order to exchange information and aim for slow but persistent influence on policies. So a seemingly weak advocacy should not be understood as a flaw but a desired state of movement action. Thus our micro level case study adds to a more diversified picture to some of the macro level civil society studies by emphasizing particular attention to how gender influences strategies of action.

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