

Global Outreach

The Great East Japan Earthquakes through Women's Lenses: Past, Present, and Future

In 2011, Mieko Yoshihama, Professor of Social Work, began a participatory action research project using a method called PhotoVoice to analyze the effects of the Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent tsunami and nuclear crisis on women in northern Japan.

The gender-based project, the first of its kind in Japan, used funding from an IRWG Faculty Seed Grant, among other sources, to provide digital cameras to women in disaster-affected areas. Over the past four and a half years, the women have photographed details of their experiences, and participated in facilitated discussions about the disasters' impact on their lives, communities, and the overall societal response.

The goal of the project, which Yoshihama envisions will continue for another decade or more, is to give voice to those who are often overlooked in disaster response policies and to provide opportunities for advocacy and policy change.

The following interview was drawn from a longer conversation.

When you say participatory action research [PAR], what do you mean?

Unlike typical research where the researchers and the technicians go in as an "expert" -- they collect data, they interview people, they do assessments of the communities -- PAR means that people who are affected by whatever you are studying, in my case it's the disasters, they're the ones who do the assessment. They are the experts. They tell us what's happening through their eyes and analysis is done collaboratively. They work with the researchers to develop recommendations, plans for action, and oftentimes, they participate in the dissemination and action.

So, PhotoVoice is a kind of PAR?



Yes. Former U-M professor Caroline Wang invented the PhotoVoice method back in the 1990s in China. At that time she and her research team were trying to provide assistance but they faced language and culture and educational barriers. The use of photography and discussions helped to capture the lives of the women in the high mountain areas. Then they were able to make significant social change.

Can you describe how the method works in your project?

We hold discussion group meetings repeatedly. The women bring their pictures -- some might bring hundreds of pictures and some might just take one -- and given the time constraint, we may ask the women to select three or five pictures to discuss. This selection process gives participants time and opportunity to examine what's going on in their lives, and what they want to talk about. Instead of having the photographer talk about the picture first, we ask her to sit silently while the rest of the group responds to the pictures. That's a new method that I have developed for this project. The group will respond with, "wow, this picture tells me something," or "when I see this picture I feel powerful," "I feel sad," or "I think this photographer wanted to share with us how angry she is." Then we ask the photographer to respond. There is something about this reverse process that gives the photographer an opportunity to reflect on the pictures she has taken, and often she gets additional meanings, additional messages, additional issues that she hadn't thought about when she took the picture.

The photographs give us an opportunity to identify societal issues: how they are felt differently, managed differently depending on your social location, whether you're a woman or a man, whether you're older, you're employed or not. I think that this method is conducive to that kind of deep discussion.

Most PhotoVoice projects aren't run the way we run ours. We really take time. A lot of PhotoVoice projects are for one month, one semester, one year, and they have a goal in mind: "we're going to create a book, a collage, a video, and that's the end product." For

The Town Has Been Turned Into a Landfill

The whole town was lost, replaced entirely by mountains of debris.

People used to live here, but now it has become a landfill.

It must be heart-wrenching to see such a horrible mess every day.

August 2011, Onagawa-cho, Oshika-gun, Miyagi
by Tamami

"The photographs give us an opportunity to identify societal issues: how they are felt differently, managed differently depending on your social location, whether you're a woman or a man, whether you're older, you're employed or not."

us, we don't know the end product. We're running this for a long, long time in closed groups with the facilitators.

What kind of impacts have you seen as a result of PhotoVoice in Japan?

These photos and written messages are now part of Japan's national archives: the National Women's Education Center and the National Diet Library, which is like the U.S. Library of Congress. That these private lives and private photos are now part of the national archive, can you imagine how much it means to the participants? They thought their lives, their experiences of the disaster were private, and we say "no, these have deep social meaning and you're the only ones who can tell us what these meanings are."

In March 2015 we presented a workshop as part of the Public Forum of the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai City, Japan. Many of the women from our PhotoVoice project participated in the workshop and they talked about their experiences with the nuclear accident, radiation, the tsunami, and earthquakes.

Any other important findings or surprises?

As a university based researcher I have to go through an institutional review board (IRB), which takes a long time and requires consent papers be signed. I was very afraid that the process would be alienating to the participants. For those people who went through the massive disasters, to have researchers say, "I want you to read this long document and sign this paper," is a foreign concept in Japan. But many of them appreciated that process. They felt they were respected. After a disaster, a lot of volunteers and researchers arrive and take photographs of the affected people, and then they would display them on their project websites without consent, at least explicitly. The feedback we got was that taking the time to explain the project procedures and the participants' rights is even more important during the chaotic period after a disaster.

The other thing was this slowness of the process, taking the time to stop, how important that is. Every day we're busy. We don't take the time to stop and think. We move on to do other things. Photo-

Voice forces us, both researcher and participant, to really stop. We have to stop to take pictures and to take notice of each other. If we asked the participants "what does it mean for you to be involved in PhotoVoice project?" They'd answer, "I'm forced to stop." ■

For more information, visit photovoice.jp.

Japan's National Women's Education Center archives:
www.nwec.jp/en/archive or http://w-archive.nwec.jp/il/meta_pub/sresult

Japan's National Diet Library: kn.ndl.go.jp



courtesy of PhotoVoice Japan

Time Stands Still

Soon it'll be three years since the disaster, but this clock is still stopped at 2:46 pm.

The world spins on, but our feelings stand still.

Don't leave us behind. Don't forget us...

August 2013, in front of Tomioka Station*, Tomioka-machi, Fukushima
by Yoshida

*1.5km from the coastline; battered by the tsunami