

PhotoVoice: Assessment of Women's Experiences of the 2011 Great East Japan Disasters

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Post-disaster disparities and vulnerabilities tend to reflect, and often amplify, pre-disaster disparities. This paper presents the findings from a PhotoVoice project with women affected by the 2011 triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accidents in northern Japan. This ongoing participatory action research examines how gender and other social positionalities impact the wellbeing of women in/after a major disaster. Since June 2011, a diverse group of women (n=35) in five localities in the most disaster-affected areas of Japan have participated in small group meetings (4-8 sessions on average). At the meeting, participants share and discuss the photographs that they have taken, reflect on and examine their experiences and associated emotions. Trained facilitators (researchers) foster interactive and empathic exchange while also encourage participants to analyze their own and other members' experiences in the historical, societal and political context. Group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using open and focused coding processes guided by grounded theories. The discussions encompassed beyond individuals' experience of trauma, dislocation, and devastation; participants have examined how individual experiences are influenced by various community, sociocultural, and structural forces. The analysis of meeting records and photographs illustrates how acts of taking photographs, sharing their experiences, thoughts and emotions, and receiving feedback from others have encouraged participants to further explore and (re)construct the meaning of their experiences in the socio-political context. Increasingly, participants have become interested in speaking out, educate and influence the general public and policy makers. Findings suggest that PhotoVoice promotes participants' reflection, wellbeing, mutual support, growth, and action. As a research method, PhotoVoice appears to be a promising approach to not only assessing the needs of disaster-affected individuals, but also promoting collective critical analysis of underlying sociocultural factors and formulating strategies to improving individual and community conditions. PhotoVoice facilitates the processes of politicalization and conscientization/conscientização (Freire, 1970).