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Motherhood discourses and political activism in post-3.11 movements in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The triple disaster in March 2011 (i.e. 3.11) triggered a national crisis that affected Japanese society on many levels. Strikingly, this crisis gave visibility to protest groups with no prior political activity organizing demonstrations against the government. One such group was *Mama no Kai*, an assembly of anti-war mothers protesting against peace and security legislation and the amendment of Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan. This paper focuses on *Mama no Kai* activism and the group's use of motherhood discourses. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with assembly members, the study aims to identify the primary characteristics of mothers' activism in the post-3.11 era, the development of the use of motherhood discourses, and the contribution of their strategies to the paradigm shift of mothers' movements in Japanese urban activism.

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Introduction

In September 2015, the National Diet of Japan enacted many statutes calling on the administration of then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to amend Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution renouncing war and prohibiting any potential exercise of the right of collective self-defense in wartime. This amendment authorizes the government to deploy self-defense forces to help its allies during war, thereby rationalizing logistical support for international security operations (Rinehart 2013). The government's interpretation of peace and security (hereinafter, *Anpo*) was based upon the idea that Japan's security environment is changing, and the Constitution of Japan should thus be changed (Hasebe 2017; Martin 2017). However, the government completely ignored the public opinion polls on amending Article 9 and the passage of the *Anpo* bills and enacted its "authoritative interpretation" (Hasebe 2017, 133), which triggered the activism of several groups and sparked the emergence of others to oppose the passage of the bills. These circumstances have led to various activists labeling the act as *kyōkō saiketsu* or "forcible voting" (Nakagawa 2015; Naito 2017), while Akifumi (2017) considered it a form of violence and misuse of state power. Civic resistance took the form of young university students, together with other activists, occupying the area around the National Diet, attempting to deter the passage of the bills under the name "SEALDs" (Students Emergency Actions

for Liberal Democracy), and focusing their activism on criticizing *Anpo* bills and on their frustration with the Abe administration's approach to the democratic process (Slater et al. 2015).

Minako Saigō, a postgraduate student at Kyoto University and a single mother of three children, was particularly motivated by the SEALDs movement, which led her to recognize the need for a group to highlight the danger of *Anpo* bills from a mother's perspective (Saigō 2015). Saigō created an online petition called *Dare no kodomo mo korosasenai*, "never let anyone's child be killed," followed by an English phrase that would later become the group's slogan, "We are mothers against war." Saigō and other members digitally founded the group *Anpo kanren hō ni hantai suru mama no kai* or "Mothers against peace and security bills," which was shortened later to *Mama no Kai* ("mothers' assembly"). The group combines its members' political activism with their gender identity and maternal responsibility as mothers willing to protect their children, and coordinates with other groups and coalitions in opposing the passage of the bills.

Ostensibly, their message appealed to various people, and in a single night, Saigō's petition letter gained 17,249 signatures. The catchy slogan, large number of signatures, and positive reaction of mothers nationwide transformed the movement from a digital initiative into a grassroots activist movement, leading to the formation of 107 coalitions across Japan, with one overseas branch in Singapore comprising Japanese mothers and housewives who lived there. Approximately 2,000 women joined the first protest, called Shibuya Jakku, organized by *Mama no Kai* in Tokyo's Shibuya ward (Saigō 2015) after the assembly declared that they did not support any political party and welcomed all participants.

The above raises the following question: Why are these women positioning themselves in a contentious political context as mothers first and not as female activists? Hasegawa (2004) convincingly argues that mobilizing motherhood has signified the universality and solidarity of such movements and compares it to the limitations faced by activists using other gender or political terms related to their civic activism. "Civil society" has a rather weak presence in Japan because of its closed political system, its strong elite alignments, the strength of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and the Japanese bureaucratic system (Freiner 2014). Hasegawa argues that using the concept of maternal responsibility made the wider society sympathize even more with the mother-led movements that tend to position their movements as "above or outside of ideology, political parties and self-interest" (Hasegawa 2004, 141). This may explain why mothers are using motherhood discourses and their state-constructed image as *ryōsai kenbo*, good wives and wise mothers (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012), who are dedicated, subservient, and politically unsophisticated, as a strategy to gain popular support and solidarity.

In a press conference held by *Mama no Kai* in July 2015, Saigō commented that the slogan *dare no kodomo mo korosasenai* was used because it resonated with everyone, adding "after all if you are not a parent, you are somebody's son or daughter who cares for you and wants nothing but the best for you" (Saigō et al. 2016, 59). That is why the discourses of motherhood have been effective, because mothers, in particular, have long been positioned as "outside the realm of politics and power" (Broadbent 1998, 163). Adopting such a strategy has given a humanitarian meaning even to a political movement such as *Mama no Kai* whose main objective stems from its members' altruistic role as mothers, which is highly valued in Japanese society.

The second reason for using motherhood and not female discourses is related to the challenge of positioning mothers' demands in the context of feminism as a women's movement. Many Japanese feminists consider mothers' rights only when they fall under women's rights, such as mothers' right to work or treating domestic roles as labor. However, consumerist mothers or mothers who are not seeking radical gender changes are undervalued and are instead considered agents of patriarchy because they are normalizing the idealized image constructed by the state without disagreeing with it. Even some iconic consumerist movements like the Seikatsu Kurabu Seikyō ("The Life Club Coop"), which was started by a group of middle class housewives, was originally created under the leadership of some male activists in Tokyo (Ki-young 2011).

Feminists's attitude toward consumerist activist mothers is best described by Ueno (1996a) who argues that motherhood is not a construct of nature or culture but rather is a historical product that is created by men in industrial societies. Ueno (1996a) claims that as a price of participating in male-constructed modern society, women have to accept their motherhood, such that they can only survive by either accepting "their status as second-class citizens or internaliz[ing] misogyny, viewing themselves from an adopted male perspective" (Ueno 1996a, 11). This may help us to understand the propensity of feminist movements to not consider mothers' activism when it takes a consumerist form, because from a feminist prospective this epitomizes mothers' subservience to the patriarchal system by accepting their gender roles and stereotypical images while showing no interest in changing their status.

However, in this paper, I argue that *Mama no Kai* has contributed to a transformation of the paradigm of mothers' activism by politicizing their apolitical identity to serve political agendas that are not associated with mothers' activism in Japan, which previously has been either consumerist or environmental in focus. By analyzing the main characteristics of the *Mama no Kai* assembly, the paper identifies the new shift in motherhood discourses and the unfamiliar use of the term "political mothers" through their strategies that led to the rapid expansion of *Mama no Kai* across Japan and even overseas (in Singapore).

The paper concludes that the paradigm shift that *Mama no Kai* generated is creating a new transformation in mothers' activism that combines their favorable image as mothers and their political identity as women who are marginalized in different aspects of life. This study is valuable because it re-interprets mothers' activism that has been always evaluated as apolitical and reveals how the *Mama no Kai* assembly has allowed mothers to combine their motherhood and womanhood through their activism.

Research methodology

The data used in this study were obtained by conducting participant observation of *Mama no Kai* movements, specifically *Shibuya Jakku* in 2015 and *Shinjuku Jakku* in 2016, and semi-structured interviews with seven representative members of *Mama no Kai* assemblies from Chiba, Saitama, and Kyoto prefectures and one politician from the Japan Communist Party, conducted between 2017 and 2020 (Table 1). The questions were structured differently based on each interviewee's background to elicit their ideas on mothers' political role in society, how they perceived feminism, and how to achieve political empowerment for women from their own perspectives.

Table 1. Interviews with *Mama no Kai* members

Assembly/ Political Party	Representative(s)	Type of interview
Mama no Kai Founder (1)	Minako Saigō (Founder, Single mother, Postgraduate student and part-time lecturer)	Oral interview (29 April 2019) Written interview (30 June 2020)
Mama no Kai Saitama (2)	Hitomi Tsuji (Housewife) Naoko Suzuki (Housewife)	Oral interview (6 November 2017) Written interview (26 March 2018)
Mama no Kai Kyoto (3)	Ayumi Nakamura (A member of <i>Mama no Kai</i>) Taro Hanura (Male member of <i>Mama no Kai</i> , house husband) M.O. (Member of <i>Mama no Kai</i>)	Oral interview (29 April 2019) Oral interview (29 April 2019) Oral interview (29 April 2019)
Mama no Kai Chiba (1)	Rie Kanamitsu (Municipal Candidate)	Written interview (27 October 2020)
Japan Communist Party	Saori Ikeuchi (Politician, women's rights and LGBTQ rights advocate)	Oral interview (18 June 2019)

The interviews started by asking a broad question, such as their opinion of such current policies as the amendment of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution or the passage of the State Secrecy Law. I also accepted invitations from some activists to attend different events and conferences that were either hosted by their assembly or in which they were taking part as guest speakers. Thus, I was able to obtain more detailed descriptions of the structure and the strategies of their movement.

Difficult circumstances or busy schedules of some interviewees hindered them from meeting directly. Two of them, Ms. Naoko Suzuki, the representative of *Mama no Kai* in Saitama Prefecture, and Ms. Rie Kanamitsu, the activist turned municipal candidate from *Mama no Kai* in Chiba Prefecture, communicated with me via emails in which they responded to my questions. Meanwhile, one interviewee of *Mama no Kai* in Kyoto Prefecture preferred not to reveal their name and referred to themselves by their initials for privacy reasons; therefore, they are referred to as M.O. In total, I conducted eight interviews, five of which were face-to-face interviews of approximately one-to-two hours each. All the face-to-face interviews were recorded except the oral interview with M. O. who only agreed to the interviews if notes were taken instead. Therefore, this interview was relatively short (30 minutes) compared to the recorded interviews. The interviews were conducted at offices, cafes, or in a separate room after the events or workshops were finished.

Why is Mama no Kai different from other mothers' movements post-3.11?

Mothers' movements have passed through different phases of contention in which they have used their collective identity as mothers in different activist frameworks, specifically, consumerist, environmental, or peace movement frameworks. All these movements, although they seem different in style and demands, share motherhood as a common gender identity and a common aim to protect children, whether from pollution, food contamination, or war. Most of these mothers' movements have depended on their accepted socio-cultural image and hegemonic femininity, or what Baba and Ikeda (2012)

label as “*joshi ryoku*,” in other words, “women’s power.” However, it should be noted that *joshi ryoku* is a term that refers to women’s power not in the feminist context but from a hegemonic femininity discourse that is derived from the cultural stereotype of women, their femininity, and how they are perceived according to social standards. It has been used as a strategy by the mothers’ movement to make their movement more cheerful and approachable, which distinguishes it from the radical feminist movement by emphasizing motherly tenderness as well as mothers’ lack of political consciousness (Kimura 2016).

However, *Mama no Kai* has shifted the post-3.11 mothers’ movement paradigm into political terrain, and their strategy did not consist in being accommodating, nonthreatening, and cheerful as Kimura (2016) argues. Rather, they were more challenging, not only going against the authorities but against their own families and sometimes losing ties with their sons and daughters whom they aimed to protect in the first place. This shift was a political transformation of mothers away from the *joshi ryoku* paradigm, or mothers who are outside the realm of politics, into being “political mothers” who pursue policy change, go against the government, and even joined radical demonstrations against the Abe administration. That is why *Mama no Kai* has introduced a different form of mothers’ movements, albeit using the same motherhood discourses; however, they are different in their practice. The ramifications of this shift were made clear by Kazuko Taira, the mother of a soldier in the Japan Self-Defense Forces who had been dispatched to South Sudan. Her activism in *Mama no Kai* caused her son to stop talking to her; nevertheless, she decided to continue her activism because she said, “it is harder to see my son die than to be resented by him” (Shimin Media 2016).

The movement has not only provided a platform for politically unaware mothers. It has also provided a space for those who already have knowledge about and know the consequences of enacting such laws, and who share a common message: protecting their children. According to participants, this message is important in itself, regardless of the difference in political or intellectual backgrounds (Saigō et al. 2016).

Anger mobilization in *Mama no Kai*

On the one hand, the idea of invoking *joshi ryoku*-based activism is to make the movement approachable and cheerful so it is “mother-like.” This is strategically done in order to make the movement seem to be a safe choice and more acceptable than the “feminist” movement, because of the negative connotations of the word “feminist” in Japan (Dales 2005). This does not mean that the demands of this movement will be answered or that their voices would have an impact on policymaking. In fact, this approach may further reinforce gender stereotypes that are deeply entrenched in the Japanese social structures of hegemonic femininity, which may raise more hurdles against vocal and outspoken women who are willing to bring about radical social changes, as they are not using “politically correct emotions” (Slater, Morioka, and Danzuka 2014, 488). Yet, this idea can be considered a positive way to normalize activism in the Japanese context and make its image less hostile than the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, which had potentially alienating radical connotations in Japan.

However, as mentioned above, *Mama no Kai* has clearly mobilized their anger on different occasions, and this contributed to their transformation beyond the conventional *joshi ryoku* paradigm. Their anger mobilization is exemplified in their speeches at their wide-

scale protests, *Shibuya Jakku* in 2015 and *Shinjuku Jakku* in 2016. In one of my interviews with Saigō she mentioned that her anger against the government had been escalating every day since 3.11, which had made it harder to believe the government. Saigō stated,

“The nuclear accident in 2011 had a great impact on me. I regret believing in the safety myth that the government kept telling us about the nuclear reactors, which made me so angry and frustrated. My anger has been escalating since the [nuclear] accident, and then I knew that the government is intending to hide all the “bad” information.¹ Then I couldn’t stand it anymore when I felt that the same scenario is going to be repeated in the *Anpo* bills.” (Interview, 30 June 2020).

The direct expression of anger, distrust, and frustration against the government is not new for social movement studies. However, Japanese mothers’ movements are specifically expected to be fearful but not angry (Slater, Morioka, and Danzuka 2014). *Mama no Kai*, however, has intentionally mobilized anger and merged it with their identity, creating a new form of resistance that is not about *joshi ryoku* or using hegemonic femininity, but rather about outraged mothers who do not care about the social standards and how they will be accepted by society, instead becoming radical mothers who direct this anger against the former administration and the political system itself. This challenges the claims of conventional mainstream women’s studies literature about mothers’ movements in Japan, namely, that they are never critical of the system because their husbands are part of it, so they cannot be radical enough to call for women’s rights (Kanai 1996).

***Mama no Kai* and women’s economic status**

Mothers who need to work for economic reasons or who wish to work for personal reasons have faced persistent hurdles because of the government policies that structurally disadvantaged them, especially single-mother households (Abe 2014). To maintain a balance between their children and their work, mothers are more likely to have part-time jobs that pay less than full-time jobs, and with limited public income support for mothers, this raises the possibility that single mothers face substantially higher poverty levels than other households (Akaishi 2011; Shirahase 2013).

Mama no Kai, through their activism, not only protest against *Anpo* bills but also criticize the economic growth policies of the government that have failed to support working mothers, especially single mothers, in the workforce (Saigō et al. 2016). That is why, to analyze the activism of *Mama no Kai*, it is necessary to reflect on former Prime Minister Abe’s economic growth policies, or Abenomics, and one of its main elements, “womenomics.” Abe’s “womenomics” purported to support working women, but it in fact raised new structural barriers against these women and made them vulnerable to the social and economic brutality of the Japanese system.

The Abe administration had been trying to mainstream gender equality, especially in the labor force, as a crucial part of its economic growth revitalization strategy. Abe’s slogan of *josei ga kagayaku shakai*, or “creating a society in which women shine,” was codified as an economic strategy known as “womenomics.” This strategy aimed to tackle different issues related to women’s empowerment across different areas. For instance, on the issue of political empowerment, the government promised to raise the proportion of

¹This refers to the State Secrecy Law that was promulgated in 2013.

female political leadership positions to 30% by 2020 but conceded in 2016 that it was not going to achieve this goal (Hu 2017). Regarding economic empowerment, the government promised to lift the female labor participation rate and increase the percentage of women returning to work.

However, many scholars have been critical of “womenomics” as a form of neoliberal reform that is exploiting women to fill gaps in the labor force simply to revitalize the economy and not to empower women. D’Ambrogio (2017), for instance, argues that regardless of the government’s efforts in implementing policies to raise the proportion of women in the workforce, women have been treated in the same “traditional” way that has ignored their circumstances and responsibilities and required them to be “good reproductive agent[s] while engaging in paid employment to an extent determined by market standards” (Takeda 2015, cited in D’Ambrogio 2017, 4). These neoliberal reforms have, rather, widened the gender gap as not all women, especially single mothers, are able to meet the requirements of the Japanese job market, thus rendering them unable to find regular employment. That is why women who cannot conform to these conditions are forced to work in part-time or dispatch jobs. Such employment leaves them feeling like they must accept treatment as “disposable labor” with no job security which, according to Ueno (2013), explains why 70% of non-regular workers are women. In the same vein, Schieder (2014) has noted the polarization of the “womenomics” policy in its treatment of women, as it may have benefited elite women who already have access to leading positions in the workforce, while ignoring the wide range of non-regular female workers who experience many hardships including their unpaid care work.

Therefore, although “womenomics” promised to tackle different issues facing women in society, it focused solely on what women could do for Japan and not what Japan could do for women. The policy did not question the status quo of these working women; it was more of a strategy to raise their proportion without considering the hurdles facing these women, such that even when their number was raised, it would not change the fact that they were engaged in low-skilled, low-paid jobs. This was also identified as a structural barrier that was facing *Mama no Kai* members, as many of them are single mothers including Saigō, the founder of the assembly. Saigō considered “womenomics” a failure for mothers: although the policy claims to create a society where women can shine, women still struggle not only economically but also socially by having to fight for their simple rights (Saigō et al. 2016). Given this background to the social and economic challenges women are facing, Saigō emphasized the importance of introducing themselves to society as mothers because of the inherent social burdens and stigma related to motherhood in a society that blames them for everything:

“Women, especially working mothers, have to apologize to the nursery when their kids have a slight fever over 37.5, they have to apologize to their children when they are late to pick them up from school, to their employers at work [...] It is always us [mothers] who take the responsibility for everything” (Saigō et al. 2016, 47).

The formation of *Mama no Kai*, albeit intended to protect children’s future, also reflects the particular kinds of social stigmatization, economic challenges, and political marginalization that many women in Japan face. This has contributed to shaping their political stance in favor of enlarging the scope of the movement across the country and mobilizing mothers who have been facing the same problems without knowing how to contextualize

their sufferings on a platform that represents their struggle and accepts them as they are. These mothers have endured many hurdles and failed policies to be with their children. However, from their perspective, the government is trying to legislate more bills that will harm the children for whom these women have been enduring all of these challenges. That is why the activism of *Mama no Kai* is more of a complex of collective action that is railing against different policies of the government.

Membership of *Mama no Kai*: A group for zero-knowledge participants

Through the grassroots activism of *Mama no kai*, many women have become engaged in local politics, not as housewives but as what Khor (1999) describes as “full-time citizens.” In this regard, Tsuji, the *Mama no Kai* representative of Saitama Prefecture, says, “I have been looking for a group that represents those who know nothing, like me; I wanted to know what is going on but not through hierarchical groups like labor unions.” Many housewives like Tsuji represent the image of traditional women in Japan, most of who worked until they were married and then left their careers to focus on their duties as mothers and housewives. However, this changed post-3.11, when women such as Tsuji came to feel the need to be engaged in political activism to learn more about the current situation and save their children from the dangers posed by the government’s policies. Because they had no political background – most of these women had never participated in political activity before – they were looking for organizations that understood their lack of political consciousness. Therefore, mothers and housewives like Tsuji were searching not only for an assembly of like-minded partners but also for an educational platform where they could learn more about politics easily. *Mama no Kai* was created to fill this gap and expanded from Hokkaido to Okinawa, serving marginalized mothers across Japan.

Members’ empowerment was realized through a process that transformed them from traditional housewives into housewife-activists who seek change on their own terms using their own strategies, unlike the “professional” women’s organizations, which understand activism as a form of gender separatism to resist patriarchal domination (hooks 2000). This has also been widely supported in the Japanese mainstream feminist literature, especially the works of Inoue, Ueno, and Yumiko (1995) and Ueno (1996b). *Mama no Kai* assemblies may not follow the orthodox feminist style in seeking direct gender-related outcomes, nor do they criticize gender equality as being “equality from the male perspective” (“*otoko nami no byōdō ka*”) (Ueno 1995, 13). Perhaps it is their different political agendas or the way they perceive their gender identity as mothers that makes their political stance already inclusive, because “the hero of [their] movement is not mothers, but children” (Saigō 2015, 143). However, this does not mean that mothers’ movements are not feminist, especially in the post-3.11 era, as mothers’ representatives have criticized “womenomics,” the economic hurdles facing women in society, and *Anpo* bills through different perspectives in their speeches. We should also note that the term “mothers” itself, albeit idealized in the wider social context, also connotes a very challenging role, especially for working mothers who are still required to balance their work and family lives while the fathers’ roles are barely scrutinized. The insistence of *Mama no Kai* on using the term “mama” in their title cannot be viewed simply as a strategy to gain great momentum

because of the value of their role; it also re-conceptualizes the role of mothers in politics who turned their movement into a space in which “they speak with their mothers’ voices” (*mama no kotoba de kataru*) (Saigō 2016, 51).

Through their platform, mothers are able to challenge the system in their own way while giving a new meaning to their identity as mother-activists, which makes them not only challenge the governmental apparatus but also their own families who may not approve of their activism, such as in the case of Kazuko Taira. In other words, while invoking their culturally accepted image as mothers, they are adding new meanings and values to it by targeting different policies that have been marginalizing them and treating them unequally in the workforce. Ultimately, this targets the social structures that idealize women as dedicated and subservient housewives while oppressing them in the workforce. Further, they challenge the social structures that make it difficult for single mothers in particular to access welfare support, which in turn makes them poorer than other households and places the blame on them for everything related to their children or family life because of the stereotypical gender roles that still prevail in society. Therefore, mothers seek changes to promote their status in different aspects of life, which is the same target that “conventional” women’s organizations are pursuing, albeit from a different angle. We can thus consider mothers’ activism not as a category that stands in opposition to women’s movements or organizations but as one that completes the picture but from a different perspective.

Mothers’ empowerment in Mama no Kai

As an educational platform, *Mama no Kai* has often hosted a *benkyōkai*, or study group. Members have focused on certain topics and studied them together to learn their rights and gain the political awareness they needed to engage in discussion with their families at home, who had been excluding them from the discussion because they lacked the necessary political knowledge. M.O., a member of the *Mama no Kai* assembly in Kyoto Prefecture, spoke of how she was empowered through *Mama no Kai*, saying the following:

“As a mother and a housewife, I always used to be silenced by my husband saying that I don’t understand anything, and all that I had to do was just listen to whatever he said. However, only through this space [*Mama no Kai*] do we get to learn about our rights, [. . .] and help each other to understand what we were not aware of; no one uses his/her authority over others” (Interview, 29 April 2019).

This form of empowerment not only enabled each *Mama no Kai* member to fight against social structures or government policies but also empowered them from within and gave them the confidence to face their husbands and children who had criticized them for their lack of political knowledge. The realization that there is nothing wrong in insisting on their rights is another form of empowerment that made them proud to be engaged in civic activism through the *Mama no Kai* movement, ignoring all the negative connotations related to civic activism in Japan. On being empowered and changing the stereotypical image related to activism in Japan, Tsuji says, “People of other coalitions in the movement used to wear masks to hide their faces; it is our right to criticize the government and make movements. Why don’t people understand that it is okay to practice our rights?” In this sense, their empowerment transformed them from traditional mothers into mother-

activists who seek change through their own perspective with their own strategies. Participating in *Mama no Kai* activism demonstrated to their families their awareness of the problems facing society and that their knowledge is not limited to the kitchen – instead, they brought the kitchen to the movement, creating a *daidokoro seiji* (kitchen politics) (Pflugfelder 1986; Dawood 2018), where they formulate their own political views; imagine their own ideal world; and, thus, develop their own power to challenge social, cultural, and political structures.

It is difficult to categorize post-3.11 *Mama no Kai* activism within the conventional paradigm of mothers' movements that were either consumerist like *Shufuren* or environmentalist like "mothers against nuclear power." We may consider *Mama no Kai* another shift in mothers' movements that keeps evolving through the repertoire of movement stages, based on the political, societal, and economic changes that occur in Japanese society. Instead, mothers' movements are merging different approaches that have already featured in previous movements, including anti-nuclear movements post-3.11, although denuclearization is not one of the main objectives pursued by *Mama no Kai*. By the time *Mama no Kai* emerged, the call for the abolition of nuclear energy had faded, and the protestors had joined other movements like SEALDs that frequently met at the same place as anti-nuclear movements used to meet. Nevertheless, *Mama no Kai* has also had many concerns regarding the *anzen shinwa*, the "Safety Myth" of the nuclear reactors that was created by the government, and this has also been significant in the speeches of the mothers' representatives of *Mama no Kai*, given the relationship between nuclear policies and safety.

This paper does not attempt to position *Mama no Kai* as a feminist movement. However, by adopting several discourses (e.g. highlighting the hurdles facing working mothers in the labor force or turning their movement into a political space for female politicians running for elected office), albeit not targeting radical gender changes, the movement may contribute to the space of feminist activities in Japan by introducing a "moderate" approach to feminism. By using their widely accepted gender identity in a reformist rather than radical direction, "mothers" may change the negative connotations associated with women's activism and feminism.

Politicization of *Mama no Kai*

As with many movements since 2011, political decentralization has been a significant mechanism in empowering civil society (Deslandes 2018) and a strategic shift from the conventional movements that previously relied on organizational hierarchy (Armeiy and Kibbe 2010). Some studies have found that decentralized movements are less likely to create a substantial change than their centralized counterparts (Willey 2011). Nevertheless, social movements in post-3.11 Japan have been mobilizing political decentralization as an effective strategy that increases civic participation and promotes diversity and individualism through being effectively leaderless or having leaders with limited power over participants as a form of structural change in urban movements.

Saigō seemed to follow the same strategy as she emphasized that each *Mama no Kai* assembly in the country works on its own and creates its own agenda based on its needs and perspectives (Saigō 2015). Thus, some *Mama no Kai* assemblies have politicized their platforms seeking a substantial impact on institutional politics, while others have focused

on normalizing the movement among a wider range of participants by adding “fathers” or “families” to their titles. The politicization of *Mama no Kai* has taken different forms. For instance, *Mama no Kai* was used by many politicians as a lobbying platform especially during elections when they shared their agendas and emphasized the importance of civic activism and how it should be reflected in institutional politics. Mizuho Fukushima, the former head of the Social Democratic Party, has been using the platform of *Mama no Kai* to give speeches on her role as a politician who will work hard to deliver the voices of mother-activists to the Diet (Dawood 2018). Her familiarity with activism draws on her experience in creating coalitions that oppose the government, including *Datsu Genpatsu o Mezasu Onna-tachi*, “women against nuclear reactors,” in 2011. This led many *Mama no Kai* members to support Fukushima in the election while creating personal relationships between *Mama no Kai* members and politicians. Tsuji proudly mentioned in one of our interviews that Fukushima has shared a picture of them together on her official Facebook page: “She [Fukushima] shares with us the same opinion and tries her best to deliver our voices, unlike other parliamentarians” (Interview, 6 November 2017). Fukushima has also been a frequent guest speaker at the “Kenpo Cafes” (a gathering that is held by some members of *Mama no Kai* which involves studying the constitution in groups) and many workshops that *Mama no Kai* organized, especially the educational ones, where they discussed the importance of blocking the *Anpo* bills and of Article 9 of the constitution.

Since *Mama no Kai* has functioned as an educational platform through study groups, workshops, and “Kenpo Cafes,” they have also been organizing rally talks and debates with some female politicians to give them more opportunities to introduce themselves to these mothers as voters. Saori Ikeuchi, a women’s rights advocate and a member of the Japanese Communist Party, used *Mama no Kai* to talk about her program, how she was going to address the hurdles facing working mothers, and how mothers were role models for their children. She drew on her personal experience and her gratitude to her mother who had helped her in her education (Interview, 18 June 2019). The great momentum *Mama no Kai* has gained has led many politicians to use their platform in the same way to influence the political behavior of these mothers. Such politicians include Yasuko Komiyama of *Kibō no Tō* (the Party of Hope) and former parliamentarian Saeko Umemura, who lost her election but remains interested in women’s issues. Through building networks with politicians, *Mama no Kai* assemblies have been extending their activism as a political actor that empowers politicians who aim to represent their demands and deliver their voices to legislative bodies.

The activism has politically empowered mother-activists themselves to realize the importance of mirroring their activism in institutional politics because “No one can express mothers’ problems more than a mother politician,” according to Kanamitsu Rie (Interview, 27 October 2020). A *Mama no Kai* member of Chiba Prefecture, she ran in the municipal assembly election of Funabashi City under the Japanese Communist Party in 2019 raising *Mama no Kai* placards during her electoral campaign. Similarly, Utako Nagao, a lawyer and a member of *Mama no Kai* in Tokyo mentioned in her interview with *Shimin Rengō* (2019), a civil alliance for peace and constitutionalism, that 25 members of *Mama no Kai* assemblies nationwide were officially running in the municipal election of 2016. All the candidates of *Mama no Kai* from across the country who decided to run for the municipal election were guided by their maternal responsibility: although they are not specialists in the usual sense of institutional politics, as mothers who are representing

their children, they consider that this responsibility makes them eligible to run. These women who have joined the movement, and through their activism have been exposed to politics, decided to enter the world of politics because they realized the importance of having someone to represent them and their demands. That is why their participation in the municipal election can be considered one of the outcomes of joining the movement and engaging in activism with other organizations such as *Shimin Rengō*. This led Naoko Suzuki, a member of *Mama no Kai* in Saitama Prefecture, to say that *Mama no Kai* functions as a “bridge that delivers people’s voices not only to the authorities but to the society in general” (Interview, 26 March 2018). This politicization at some assemblies of *Mama no Kai* across the country shifted the image of mothers from “silent protectors of the family” (Holthus and Holdgrün 2014, 1) who were not expected to oppose the public discourse or oppose the policies of the state (Saito 2012), to outspoken political agents who were willing to change the landscape of Japanese politics.

On the other hand, using motherhood discourses does not necessarily mean that these mothers have the knowledge needed to substantially change male-dominated politics, which raises the following concern: if any of these mothers were recruited, they might be considered token representatives rather than active political agents. This also raises another concern around the strategy of *Mama no Kai*: their proclaimed nonpolitical affiliation. Although this strategy has contributed genuinely to enlarging the scale of the movement across the country, especially after 3.11, the sight of *Mama no Kai* members running under the Communist Party banner has raised many concerns about their actual political stance, such as Andō (2016) who labelled *Mama no Kai* as a Communist Party-led movement.

Political interaction of Mama no Kai with other coalitions

The platform of *Mama no Kai* was also politicized through their interactions with other coalitions and uniting with them against the Abe administration. On 1 October 2017, along with other coalitions, *Mama no Kai* organized a protest in Shinjuku district calling for the resignation of the Abe cabinet in the wake of the Kake Educational Institution and Moritomo Gakuen scandals that stirred up suspicions of favoritism. Abe’s attitude toward protestors ignited a viral anger, especially after he criticized some protestors for interrupting one of his electoral campaigns, saying, “We cannot lose to people like this [protestors],” a statement that was criticized by *Mainichi Shimbun* as “immature.” Abe dealt with the protestors by treating them as a different category of Japanese people that he needed to defeat, rather than as citizens whose demands he had to listen to. This galvanized more coalitions into action, including *Mama no Kai* who used placards featuring Abe’s statement against him, saying, “It’s us [the people] who cannot lose to you” (The Mainichi 2017).

At this point, *Mama no Kai* shared some demands not listed in their main agenda with other coalitions to pressure the Abe administration to resign. Together with other coalitions, they launched “Force Quit,” a march that called for the resignation of the Abe cabinet because it ignored public opinion and passed security and secrecy bills that made protestors, leftist coalitions, and opposition parties skeptical about his policy objectives. *Mama no Kai* then slightly modified their slogan to “for a better future for our children, let’s force the

Abe cabinet to quit” (Dawood 2018). They also joined protests that were not directly related to their agenda such as the one against Yuriko Koike, the current governor of Tokyo, for having a conservative agenda that failed to represent women, especially mothers.

Realizing the importance of institutional politics, *Mama no Kai* held marches in Tokyo titled “Go Vote” to urge people to participate in the elections of September 2017. Although their activism has now decreased compared to when they started in 2015, in part due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, *Mama no Kai* has continued some of its political activities, debates, and virtual cafes where they debate current political issues and government policies in dealing with the virus while exchanging views on certain politicians, especially during elections. It is now more of a discursive space that still functions as an educational platform for mothers of different educational and political backgrounds nationwide. However, can this discursive platform create a substantial change by being only an educational space? Or is *Mama no Kai* declining because its activities are not related to grassroots activism and it has reverted to being an online movement as it was in the beginning? More observation is needed of the future activities of *Mama no Kai* and whether they will maintain their activism or limit it to raising the awareness of mothers who lack political knowledge.

Concluding remarks

Mama no Kai has empowered mothers, especially those with no prior political experience, on many levels. It has functioned as an umbrella platform that addresses the political, economic, and societal hurdles facing these mothers, especially single-mother households, and relates them to the *Anpo* bills. Functioning as an educational platform, *Mama no Kai* has helped these mothers to gain knowledge of the myriad political problems besetting Japanese society, transforming them from powerless housewives and silent protectors into outspoken activists willing to change the landscape of Japanese politics. The politicization of the movement and its engagement with other movements that do not necessarily reflect their direct agendas made it function as a lobbying platform for like-minded politicians while paving the way for mother members themselves to run for election to influence institutional politics from their maternal perspective based on their experience of civic engagement in *Mama no Kai*. The transformation of *Mama no Kai* from mothers as apolitical silent protectors to outspoken and radical political mothers has created a new paradigm for mothers’ movements, which have been always labeled as being outside the realm of politics. *Mama no Kai* has also pioneered a new form of mothers’ activism through merging their womanhood and motherhood in the ways they criticize “womenomics” and bring attention to the challenges of their economic statuses, especially for single mother households.

Conversely, the movement should be also regarded critically, especially in terms of the politicization of the movement and recruiting mothers who run for election. Using motherhood discourses does not necessarily mean that these mothers have the knowledge needed to substantially change the male-dominated politics, which raises the possibility that they may be considered as token representatives rather than active political agents. Another concern is the sight of *Mama no Kai* members running under the Communist Party banner, which goes against their strategy as an assembly with no political affiliation. Many matters need to be clarified about how they as an

assembly want to position themselves, especially after the movement has expanded to form more than 107 coalitions nationwide. For instance, as some assemblies have politicized their platform and showed support for certain politicians, it remains unclear as to what their plan is and whether they are considering institutionalizing their assembly. If so, how will they distinguish their viewpoints from the already existing organizations that pursue the same goal, such as the *Seikatsusha Network* that supports women's political empowerment, and raise their proportion in the Japanese legislatures? More analysis and further observation of *Mama no Kai* is needed to be able to identify their future endeavors and how they consider their activism in the long run. Apart from these open questions, *Mama no Kai* has already blazed a new path as a post-3.11 mothers' movement in the ways it has normalized the culture of opposition among mothers and how it has developed alternative meanings for how society conceives of the role of mothers in contentious politics in a society that rarely engages in civic activism.

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