

[研究論文]

# Thai Women as Marginalized Population in Disaster Affected Areas: The Case of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami 2011

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## 1. Background of the Research

Although Japan has a long history of disaster experience with comprehensive disaster preparedness plans, the magnitude-9.0 Great East Japan Earthquake, which generated a massive and devastating tsunami, hit the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011. The earthquake and tsunami led to catastrophic destruction in the coastal areas of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures. Much of those areas' infrastructures, including railways, ports, airports, hospitals, schools, fire stations, city government buildings, commercial buildings, factories, and disaster management centers, were destroyed by the tsunami. Additionally, a large number of houses flew through the water propelled by the power of the wave. The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami (GEJET) resulted in a loss of approximately 18,500 lives. According to the National Police Agency (2013), the numbers of dead and missing people were

15,882 and 2,668, respectively. The estimated costs of the tsunami disaster were more than 235 billion USD (World Bank, 2011). Miyagi Prefecture was the most affected, with 9,571 people killed and 1,302 people missing. In Ishinomaki, this research's target area, the numbers of dead and missing people were 3,259 and 448, respectively (National Police Agency, 2013). Moreover, the effect of the earthquake and tsunami was triggered by the continuing crisis at Fukushima: its Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was attacked by the triple disasters of the earthquake, the tsunami, and radioactive releases.

In addition to the massive physical destruction in the Tohoku region, GEJET not only imposed large economic costs but also had a direct impact on people in terms of lost lives and dislocated families. In response, the Japanese government established the Reconstruction Agency to pursue a Basic Policy on Reconstruction for disaster recovery and management. This national agency works with various domestic and international relief agencies and NPOs to plan and implement disaster recovery, which was implemented immediately after the event, using emergency relief procedures, recovery programs, and rehabilitation programs. Various volunteer-supported programs were provided to tsunami victims, many of which many continue today.

Because natural disaster causes not only physical damage but also sociological consequences, many tsunami victims are experiencing depressive situations without future prospects, unhealthy conditions in the evacuation centers or temporary housing. These vulnerable groups of tsunami victims include

marginalized people who struggle in vulnerable conditions as migrants who experienced the tsunami, including Filipinos, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Thais. They migrated to Japan for different reasons, including working at restaurants, snack bars, hotels, entertainment places, construction sites, manufacturing plants, and food processing factories; others migrated to marry Japanese people. Numerous migrants who live in the Tohoku coastal zone experienced the tsunami and are trying to reorient themselves to normal life.

The research aims to understand the sociocultural marginalization of migrants, focusing on Thai women in Ishinomaki, which is located in Miyagi Prefecture, one of the areas that experienced the worst destruction from the tsunami and the target of this study. This is qualitative research that attempts to delineate Thai women's vulnerabilities both before and after the disaster and assumes that pre-disaster vulnerability is associated with post-disaster vulnerability.

Fieldwork was conducted that included both in-depth interviews with Thai women in Ishinomaki and a field survey trip around tsunami-affected areas to understand the current situations of the target population. The narrative approach was implemented for data analysis on the vulnerable lives of Thai women, especially in times of disaster. This paper is a research field note that describes the experience of field research in the tsunami-affected area with Thai women in Ishinomaki as marginalized people who experienced GEJET. It is expected to share a social-science research experience addressing real-life conditions to increase awareness and

understanding of social vulnerability, especially in times of disaster.

## **2. The Concept and Theory of Migration and Thai Women in Japan**

There have been tremendous numbers of studies on Japan's foreign residents, especially since the great immigration flow of the 1980s and 1990s. However, most of those studies are dedicated to (1) Philippine female marriage migrants in a discussion of gender and globalization, (2) Brazilian labor migrants and their second and third generations analyzed in discussions of migrant workers' rights and multiculturalism, and (3) Descendants of Korean migrants who immigrated to Japan before 1945 in the discussion of citizenship for foreign nationals. Most other groups of migrants tend to be classified as similar to one of above groups for the purposes of either policy-making or NGO activities. There has been little analysis of the particular issues or situations of such groups, which have not attracted a great deal of attention. This is also true for the research on foreign residents who experienced the tsunami. Analysis of foreign residents who experienced the tsunami includes one study of a Thai female marriage migrant (Takeda 2012). However, that study analyzes its subject as a typical "female marriage migrant from Asia to Rural Japan."

Known research on Thai female migrants in Japan has tended to address those migrants as the victims of human trafficking engaged or trapped in a service industry, namely, the "commodification of women." (Aoyama 2009, Inaba 2008). Studies that attempt to analyze "ordinary Thai female migrants" tend not to have a broad

focus (Ishii 2009, Kulpranton 2009). The reasons that analysis of Thai female migrants in Japan are uncommon could include the following: (1) their small share of the total marriage migrant population in Japan, (2) the popular tendency to discuss Filipino female migrants' situation as mainstream tends to assume a single category of "Thai and Philippine female migrants", (3) the discontinuity of a network among Thai female migrants and the difficulty of finding particular social issues or life strategy patterns that are particularly shared among Thai female migrants.

Unlike many female marriage migrants in Japan, 'chain migration' is not commonly found among Thai marriage migrants. This diversity of marriage opportunities results from diversity either in the social class of Thai families or the economic/social situation of Japanese husbands. Consequently, each Thai marriage migrant identifies herself in the complicated "local" hierarchy particular among marriage migrants in Japan, which is a mixture of their social class in Thailand and the economic/social situation of their Japanese husbands. Some such women identify themselves in the higher class within the local hierarchy among Thai marriage migrants because they originated from a higher class in Thailand, whereas others identify themselves in the higher class because of a rich Japanese husband. The former and latter groups are not easy to unify as "Thai marriage migrants." The social attitude toward "Thai and Philippine female migrants" by the mainstream also has a negative affect, making it difficult to unify "Thai marriage migrants" in Japan.

Building on the scarcity of empirical researches on Thai

marriage migrants, this paper aims to provide empirical data that will describe Thai female marriage migrants' particular vulnerability and their strategies to overcome it after experiencing and attempting to recover from GEJET.

### **3. The Planned Fieldwork**

This research was supported by the International Program of Collaborative Research (IPCR), Center of Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Kyoto University. It was designed to organize field research in Japan during a 3-month period as a visiting research scholar based at CSEAS. Because the main research objective was designed to study marginalized people who experienced GEJET, the research methodology was formulated to focus on fieldwork in the Tohoku region, especially in Ishinomaki City, as the primary study area. There were two field trips to Ishinomaki. The first field trip was a reconnaissance field survey, which aimed to obtain an orientation to the tsunami-affected areas, with a target area as the trip's primary focus. In addition to obtaining an overview of the study area, this field trip was planned to facilitate meetings with key informants, who could provide solid information about tsunami recovery, especially that effected through volunteer programs. There was a field trip around Miyagi, tracking the tsunami's impact after three years in Ishinomaki City, Onagawa, and Minami-Sanriku. Importantly, this reconnaissance survey aimed to identify Thai women who live in Ishinomaki, addressed as marginalized people who experienced the tsunami. This first trip took place over four days in early September 2014 to conduct meetings with key

stakeholders in the research, including Thai women and volunteer organizations related to tsunami recovery, such as the Ishinomaki Future Support Association (IFSA) and the Ishinomaki Mangattan Museum. These organizations played a vital role in Ishinomaki's tsunami recovery. From this fieldwork, a research implementation plan was developed with a clear target identification and a checklist of questions for in-depth, data-collecting interviews. Seven Thai women live in Ishinomaki, but not all of them directly experienced the tsunami. We made appointments with each of them for in-depth, individual interviews concerning on private and confidential issues, which they preferred to share with a researcher as an 'outsider' to their community but who holds the 'same nationality' as they do. The second trip for fieldwork consisted of two weeks of data collection during mid- October 2014 in Ishinomaki City, conducting in-depth interviews with Thai women. These interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview approach with a questions checklist as a guideline. This method was designed to open up any other issue that was raised during an interview to obtain more detail and extended information, not to restrict the answers to those responsive to designed questions. A recorder was used to record each interview, which would later be transcribed. Moreover, the researcher spent time with Thai women to observe their living conditions, thoughts, and social interactions, and the stories from the fieldwork will be told in the following section.

#### **4. Notes from the Fieldwork**

•Ishinomaki City

Based on the field survey around Miyagi, which suffered massive destruction caused by the tsunami, the affected areas are still empty, with some ruined buildings remaining. However, there have been construction starts to rebuild towns, roads, houses, and manufacturing; these starts are the result of the government-developed reconstruction plan. Many tsunami victims are staying in 'kasetsu', or temporary housing, waiting on a list for public housing, which is under construction. More of the victims who live in 'kasetsu' are elderly people, and it is difficult to address their living conditions in a small 'kasetsu' space that provides them with a lower standard of living than before the tsunami. Mental problems have become a serious issue for these residents, thus creating a need for long-term volunteer support programs.

In the Ishinomaki area, there is limited land to construct public housing because a large area of the city was declared as a risk area and reconstruction was prohibited. There is a five-year town and city plan that includes zoning, construction, and tourism development plans in Ishinomaki City. This plan was developed through brainstorming, meetings, and group discussion among different sectors of the community, including the government, the private sector, NPOs, and community residents. Ishinomaki is a quiet town, but it is full of 'Izakayas' and 'Philippines Pubs'. There are a few tourist attractions, such as Ishinomaki Mangattan Museum. Indeed, Ishinomaki City was developed as a 'manga' town, erecting various manga statues on its streets to create a lively

environment even before the tsunami. Afterwards, there were many volunteer programs to support tsunami victims. However, none specifically targeted marginalized people, although there was no condition that required support regardless of nationality. Volunteer programs for recovery include medical teams, relaxation and entertainment groups, mental health care, child care, community support, transportation, reform of shelter sanitation, livelihood support, support for fisheries, mud clearance, hot meal supplies, material distribution, and community revitalization.

• Thai women as a marginalized population

In Miyagi Prefecture, there are 868 registered populations from 33 non-Japanese nationalities. The top three nationalities migrating to Miyagi are Chinese (410 people), Korean (159), and Filipinos (99), respectively. These migrants are viewed as societal minorities. There are 15 Thai people in the prefecture, 10 of whom live in Ishinomaki. These are all women who married Japanese men, who hold spousal visas and are housewives. Most of these Thai women have lived in Ishinomaki for more than ten years or sometimes up to twenty years. They learned to speak Japanese from daily life, although some of them took Japanese classes in town, conducted by a volunteer Japanese teacher.

The first meeting with the Thai women was at a luncheon hosted by the researcher. Seven Thai women attended, by arrangement of the volunteer Japanese teacher, who knows most of Thai women in town. This first meeting was set up as a lunch talk, making each other's acquaintance and exchanging contact information so that

interview appointments could be made. The Thai women were happy when they were told by the Japanese teacher that a Thai researcher would like to meet them. They believed that nobody cared or was concerned about their lives in Japan because they were ‘nobodies’ and a ‘minority within a minority’ in their living community because the Thai population is very small compared to other nationalities in a given society. During this lunch meeting, there was a lively group discussion. The women mentioned that they were isolated from community and felt left behind even before the tsunami. They all experienced the disaster, and shared their stories and feelings. They recovered from the tsunami by relying on their husbands, who received support from Japanese government. One of the women continues to live in ‘kasetzu’, waiting for public housing. This lunch meeting was organized only to get to know each other and to make appointments for further research. Therefore, details of the women’s life in Japan both before and after the tsunami were not yet clarified, but it was planned to do that during the second fieldwork trip.

The second field trip included full, in-depth interviews that were individually arranged with each respondent. During the first fieldwork, seven Thai women agreed to an interview. Unfortunately, for personal reasons, three of those respondents could not be interviewed. However, four respondents gave in-depth interviews that provided solid information required for the planned research. The narrative approach was used to enable each respondent to tell her story, including how she settled in Japan, her living conditions before the tsunami, her tsunami experience, her living conditions

following the tsunami, and her expectations for her life and future plans. Most of the interviews lasted for approximately two hours, and were conducted at restaurants or cafes that were convenient for the respondents. Most of the respondents preferred to be interviewed during the daytime while their children were in school, thus providing them with free time.

• Narrative interviews with Thai women

Based on the interview guidelines designed for narrative data collection, each respondent was asked to tell her story, beginning with her family background and life in Thailand before coming to Japan. For some reason, the women did not want to discuss this topic in much detail. They explained that they were from poor families in rural Thailand, and that they had no interesting stories to tell. However, when turning to the subject of their lives in Japan, the respondents seemed more willing to tell their stories, beginning with how they met their husbands. One interesting point was how the men and women communicated with each other because the Thai women could not speak either Japanese or English. The Thai women were happy to share their stories through ‘talk-and-laugh’ when they talked about their experiences of communication difficulty with their ‘husbands-to-be’. They became more serious when they described living with Japanese families, mostly about their difficulties in adjusting to Japanese culture, especially in the Tohoku region, which continues to adhere to a strongly traditional way of life and a male-dominated society. The Thai women’s stories of living with Japanese families conveyed some sense of stress,

coupled with an attempt to cope with their problems through the Buddhist concept of 'let it be'.

All of the respondents described issues related to living in a Japanese community and adapting to Japanese culture. Language was the primary problem during their early years in Japan. Thai women came to live here with no knowledge of Japanese; they learned through daily life with their husbands and children. Living in a Japanese family in the same house as the husband's parents also exerted pressure on Thai women, who were required to perform different household roles, such as caring for husbands and children, housekeeping, caring for their husbands' parents, and even working in family businesses without a salary. Every respondent described the cultural differences in the same way. For example, Thai women need to send remittances to their families in Thailand. However, a Japanese husband and his family might not understand this requirement, which does not normally exist in Japanese society. The respondents told stories about some Thai women who used to live in Ishinomaki but returned to Thailand. Those women experienced stress from living with Japanese families and could not adjust to Japanese culture. Unfortunately, they became alcoholics and had see psychologists for mental problems. All of the Thai women reported that they were missing their homes in Thailand and felt lonely and isolated from the Japanese community, especially in the remote Tohoku area. This loneliness and isolation was even worse for Thai woman who married Japanese men by arrangement. They did not feel 'love' but remained couples to perform their expected roles and responsibilities in the family. Living in a couple and

family without love made Thai woman even feel more lonely and depressed. However, the existence of a small group of Thai women in Ishinomaki helped them feel better because they were able to get together at a house, cook Thai food to eat, and share moral support for those who had problems.

The Thai women interviewed had experienced the tsunami directly. They shared their experiences in detail, from how they noticed the earthquake and tsunami warning, experienced the evacuating process, stayed in shelters, and returned to normal life. Those who lost important documents such as passports, visas and bank books had trouble because they knew little about the process and steps of re-applying. Many documents were required to be written in Japanese, which is difficult for the women to do. Therefore, they need to help each other to complete the process. The Thai women generally understood that the tsunami was a natural disaster that was unexpected by the entire country. They accepted what had happened to their lives during the tsunami and recovery, which was difficult but understandable. As one Thai woman said, *“after the wave, life goes on and we need to live with what we have.”* She said this with smile. Everybody in the community faced the same situation and lived under the same conditions during the recovery process. Moreover, massive relief assistance was provided by organizations worldwide, generating cheerfulness in the victims. However, the Thai women mentioned that they would like to know about disaster preparedness and to participate in drills, which they had not previously had the opportunity to do. They want to feel secure and to be able to help themselves in case of emergency,

when chaos surrounds them and information is provided only in the Japanese language and therefore might be unclear to them.

When the interview turned to the topic of their expectations and future life plans, all of the Thai women stated that they wanted to return to Thailand if possible. In reality, however, they worry about their children being left to stay in Japan with their fathers. Moreover, the Thai women did not want to take their children back to Thailand because they had been were born in Japan and raised Japanese. They worried that their children might find it difficult to adapt to Thai culture. As one Thai woman stated, *“Japan is not my home, but it is my children’s home, so I stay”*.

At the end of the interview, the Thai women said that they did not worry about the tsunami disaster because it was a natural disaster, and natural disasters come and go. Even before the tsunami hit Ishinomaki, they worried about their lives. They felt that even before the tsunami, they were experiencing a ‘disaster of life’ and vulnerable conditions due to cultural differences and pressures from their Japanese families. Consequently, following the tsunami they experienced a condition of ‘double vulnerability’ in Japan. This group of Thai women in Ishinomaki still attempts to manage their vulnerabilities with a sense of ‘it is ok’ (or ‘mai pen rai’ in Thai) as a Thai style of dealing with difficulty.

## **5. Afterthoughts and Conclusion**

Interviewing Thai women who found it difficult to live within traditional Japanese families in the remote Tohoku region of Japan was an interesting experience in social science fieldwork.

There was fruitful information to obtain not only about the subjects' tsunami experiences but also about their lives from the time that they settled in Japan until the present. To implement data collection in the fieldwork, the researcher received a great deal of support from key contact persons, including lecturers from important universities and the volunteer Japanese teacher, to help make contact with Thai women and other key informants for this research. A personal network and personal recommendation were important mechanisms for contacting all of the respondents, who did not previously know the researcher. Arranging meetings and interview appointment, therefore, became easier. Moreover, because the researcher shared a nationality with the respondents—and especially because both the researcher and the respondents were Thai women—the subjects were comfortable openly sharing their life stories openly and in detail. The conversations between the respondents and the researcher were in Thai, but sometime respondents could not find the right Thai words and used Japanese words to express their ideas; in such situations the researcher, with the respondents' assistance, attempted to find the meaning of those mentioned words. This might reflect the respondents' daily lives, in which they mostly speak Japanese to communicate with their families and rarely speak Thai.

To make appointments with each of the respondents, there were many postponements due to availability, because the respondents were often engaged in their families' routine tasks. However, they made their best efforts to find time for the interviews. There was no avoidance or hesitation in answering all of the questions; indeed,

the respondents provided more information about other issues that related to their lives in Japan. This reflected both trust and a comfortable feeling between respondents and researcher, which was built from the first luncheon in the first fieldwork, which included informal discussion on general topics, thus generating familiarity. This process is very important for social qualitative research in fieldwork, which primarily relates to people's real lives, including both facts and feelings.

In conclusion, the Thai women studied were confronted by double vulnerabilities in their lives, both from their ordinary living conditions and the tsunami disaster. This double vulnerabilities especially appears on information access for them. Although people lost their houses and properties by the disaster have to gather, understand and decide upon information under the difficult situation, those double vulnerable migrant women hardly can do that. In the same time, they have to go through many documented works to apply for public support, such migrant women have to totally rely on these matters their Japanese families. In short, migrant women are vulnerable both for information gathering and information transmission, due to their double vulnerability. Marginalization of marriage migrant women in the daily life within their family and community is one of the key point here. Existing researches on Thai migrant women in Japan tended to overlook daily marginalization of marriage migrants, as their status do not fit 'traditional' human trafficking schema. However, marriage migrants who live as members of Japanese families may also suffer from vulnerable status, linguistically, economically or socially.

These ‘marginalization in family/community they are embedded’ should be carefully analyzed in future studies.

They agreed to share their stories without hesitating to provide details, whether they were good or bad. They expected this research about their life to be used as a lesson for other Thai women who are interested in a cross-cultural marriage, especially with a Japanese man. Moreover, they hope that providing their experiences related to the tsunami as a case study can help future disaster preparedness development plans to include marginalized people as a vulnerable group that requires specific support because although they do not understand Japanese properly, they still must engage in the complicated process of reapplying for important documents. These Thai women’s stories will be described using a narrative approach with anonymous respondents (for privacy); however, the stories will retain their solid and concrete detail, comments, opinions, expectations, and expressed feelings as original, with a sophisticated analysis to develop a body of academic knowledge.

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## 災害弱者としての在日タイ女性 —東日本大震災の事例から—

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### 要 約

本稿の目的は、災害弱者としての外国籍市民の置かれた状況を、現地調査をもとに明らかにすることにある。既存の在日外国人に関する研究の文脈では、在日タイ女性を対象とした研究は少なく、数少ない既存研究もタイ女性を人身売買の被害者として扱うか、もしくは蓄積の著しい在日フィリピン女性をめぐる議論を援用して扱うことが多かった。しかし東日本大震災とそれに続いた津波被害を経験しながらも引き続き被災地で生活を送る在日タイ女性への調査結果からは、調査対象となった在日タイ女性たちはそもそも被災者となる以前から、既存研究が在日フィリピン女性について指摘してきた相互扶助ネットワークや英語を活かした生存戦略に乏しく、日本人家族と暮らしながら日本社会のなかで周縁化される傾向が強かったことが浮かび上がった。この周縁化はとくに言語や情報収集の面で顕著であったといえる。この周縁性がひとたび被災者となり仮説住居で暮らすようになった場合、情報収集・情報発信の両面において深刻化した。この結果、在日タイ女性たちは、被災者としての情報収集・発信における困難と外国籍市民としての困難との、「二重の脆弱性」に晒される状況に陥っていると言っていることができるのではないだろうか。