

Making Mothers Responsible After Fukushima in Japanese Media

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Abstract

This study examines how mother–child evacuation following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster has been discursively constructed in Japanese mainstream newspapers over the first decade after the accident. Drawing on theories of risk society, mediapolis, and proper distance, and employing a longitudinal critical discourse analysis of five major national newspapers published between 2011 and 2021, this article demonstrates that Japanese newspapers consistently portrayed mother–child evacuation as a social wrong, while simultaneously individualizing moral responsibility by foregrounding mothers as primary caregivers. Fathers, children, and institutional actors, including the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated (TEPCO), were largely marginalized as morally responsible subjects. This gendered framing stabilized a particular moral order in which women’s precautionary decisions were moralized, while structural and institutional responsibility was backgrounded. By foregrounding gender as a structuring principle of mediated moral relations, this study advances Silverstone’s concepts of mediapolis and proper distance and contributes to debates on media, morality, and risk governance in post-disaster societies.

Keywords

Fukushima; gender; Japan; mass media; mediapolis; morality

1. Introduction

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and the ensuing tsunami struck northeastern Japan, precipitating core meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Beyond its immediate physical devastation, the Fukushima disaster, as the first nuclear disaster in the digital age, generated a prolonged and deeply contested communication space surrounding health, environmental safety, and responsibility (e.g., Abe, 2014, 2015, 2023a; Berti-Suman et al., 2020; Kimura, 2016; Kiyohara, 2017; Kuchinskaya, 2019; Morita et al., 2013; Plantin, 2015; Tam, 2020; Van Oudheusden & Abe, 2021). As competing information

about safety and exposure proliferated in the aftermath of the disaster, large-scale displacement within Fukushima Prefecture and beyond emerged not only as a response to physical contamination but also as a consequence of fractured trust, contested expertise, and uneven communication (e.g., Hasegawa & Yamamoto, 2017). Evacuation, in this sense, represents one of the most consequential social outcomes of the Fukushima disaster, underscoring how the event unfolded not only as a technological and environmental disaster but also as a crisis of communication.

Evacuation after Fukushima was never a uniform or uncontested process (e.g., Kwansei Gakuin Daigaku Saigai Fukkō Seido Kenkyūjo et al., 2015; Toda, 2018). While some residents were compelled to evacuate from areas officially designated by the state as posing unacceptable threats to health and safety, others left from outside these zones. The latter movements have generally been categorized as *jishu hinan* or *jishuteki hinan*, translated as “voluntary evacuation.” As many critics pointed out, this label is far from politically neutral (e.g., Toda, 2016a). By foregrounding voluntariness, it implicitly reallocates responsibility from the state to individuals and families, framing evacuation as a matter of personal choice rather than collective protection or institutional failure. Within the category of voluntary evacuation, one form that became particularly visible and contentious was *boshi hinan*, or “mother–child evacuation” (e.g., Kana, 2013; Morimatsu, 2013; C. Yoshida, 2016). Toda (2016a) defines mother–child evacuees as “families in which, in order to protect children from health effects of radioactive substances, mothers voluntarily evacuate with their children while fathers remain behind, due to employment constraints” (p. 6). Although not unprecedented, similar patterns were observed following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (e.g., Adams et al., 2002). In post-Fukushima Japanese society, mother–child evacuation often involved relocation to other regions, such as Yamagata and Okayama Prefectures, generating significant social challenges such as economic strain and family separation (e.g., Kwansei Gakuin Daigaku Saigai Fukkō Seido Kenkyūjo et al., 2015). In some cases, however, these pressures proved devastating, as seen in the widely reported 2017 suicide of a mother who had evacuated with her child to Yokohama (Aoki, 2021). Mother–child evacuation thus sits at the intersection of gender and risk governance, foregrounding a significant social wrong in the gendered allocation of risk and responsibility, and raising questions about who is expected to act under conditions of scientific uncertainty and whose actions are rendered morally appropriate.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined mother–child evacuation following the Fukushima disaster (e.g., Konno & Sato, 2014; Matsunaga, 2018; Sklyar, 2021; Tanaka, 2016; Tsutsui et al., 2020; Yamane, 2013). Collectively, the previous literature has indicated that mother–child evacuation after nuclear disaster cannot be understood as a singular or homogeneous phenomenon. Rather, it is characterized by diverse motivations, constraints, and trajectories, shaped by class, region, family structure, and access to resources. While these studies have been indispensable in illuminating the everyday realities of those involved, including mothers, fathers, children, and in some cases, grandparents, they have largely focused on individual experiences or survey-based data.

Building on prior scholarship, this study advances the literature in two key respects. First, rather than focusing on individual narratives, it systematically analyzes mainstream media coverage to examine how mother–child evacuation has been framed and reframed within Japanese public discourse. This approach illuminates how those involved in mother–child evacuation have been collectively debated and politicized through media representation. It also indicates which aspects of mother–child evacuation are foregrounded, normalized, problematized, or rendered invisible in public debate, extending the focus beyond those directly

concerned with evacuation, including mothers who evacuated with their children while leaving their partners behind. Second, this study adopts a longitudinal perspective to trace changes in media portrayals of mother–child evacuation over time. As will be illuminated in the next section, historical context matters profoundly for how mother–child evacuation has been positioned since the Fukushima disaster. Rather than relying on snapshot surveys or one-off qualitative interviews, this study examines the extent to which representations of mother–child evacuation have changed or remained unchanged across different phases of the post-disaster period, thereby shedding light upon the temporal dynamics through which certain perspectives gain dominance while others recede.

Accordingly, this study examines how mother–child evacuation has been discursively constructed in Japanese mainstream media. By focusing on media representations over time, it seeks to show how particular forms of family separation and risk-taking were framed as legitimate, problematic, or marginal within the broader politics of post-Fukushima recovery. Silverstone (2007) noted as follows:

The mediated images of strangers increasingly define what actually constitutes the world....And since it is the relationship we have with others which defines the nature of our own being, then such links as we might have with these mediated individuals are increasingly becoming the crucial ones for us too. (p. 4)

As such, the study contributes to media and communication research by investigating not merely how mother–child evacuation was publicly produced through discourse, where power and morality are continuously negotiated, but also how their representations shaped what is termed post-Fukushima Japanese society. This study addresses the following research questions: (a) How did Japanese mainstream media (major Japanese national newspapers in particular) portray mother–child evacuation from March 12, 2011, to March 12, 2021, in post-Fukushima Japanese society? and (b) How did these representations contribute to the construction of gendered moral responsibility and proper distance between audiences and those involved in mother–child evacuation?

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section provides historical and institutional context, with particular attention to legal frameworks relevant to mother–child evacuation. The third section outlines the theoretical framework. The fourth section describes the methodology, followed by a presentation of the key findings. The final section discusses the implications of these findings and suggests directions for future research.

2. Contextualizing Mother–Child Evacuation After Fukushima

The Fukushima disaster prompted a significant reconfiguration of regulatory and discursive frameworks surrounding radiation exposure in Japan, which in turn shaped the conditions under which mother–child evacuation emerged. Prior to the disaster, the Japanese government had set the annual additional radiation exposure limit—excluding natural background radiation and medical exposure—at no more than 1 mSv per year. In the wake of the disaster, however, it drew on Recommendation 109 of the International Commission on Radiological Protection, published in 2008, which proposed an annual additional exposure range of 20 to 100 mSv and served as an authoritative reference point for post-accident radiation governance.

On April 19, 2011, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued a notice entitled *Provisional Guidelines for the Use of School Buildings and School Grounds in Fukushima Prefecture*, setting a *provisional* reference range of 1–20 mSv per year for decisions regarding the use of school facilities in “areas excluding those designated as evacuation zones, as well as areas that are to be designated as planned evacuation zones or emergency evacuation preparation zones” in Fukushima Prefecture (Bandō et al., 2008, para. 4). As a result, a post-disaster environment emerged in which children’s attendance at school in Fukushima Prefecture under annual additional radiation exposure levels up to 20 times higher than the pre-disaster standard was institutionally framed as morally acceptable. More broadly, this shift reflects the production of a discursive and institutional space in post-Fukushima Japanese society in which differential radiation exposure limits for children inside and outside Fukushima Prefecture were normalized.

However, the government’s response drew substantial criticism, in part because it was widely recognized from the outset that the health effects of radiation exposure are more uncertain for children than for adults, thereby contributing to both the emergence and subsequent expansion of mother–child evacuation (e.g., Takahashi & Koike, 2018). In December 2011, the government declared the nuclear accident to be “under control,” yet mother–child evacuation continued.

Against this backdrop, the Act on the Promotion of Measures to Support the Lives of Disaster Victims, Including Children Affected by the Tokyo Electric Power Company Nuclear Accident (hereafter the Child Victims Support Act) was enacted in June 2012 through cross-party cooperation that transcended political affiliations (Löschke, 2026). A defining feature of the Act is that it extends its scope beyond evacuees displaced under government orders to include those who evacuated on their own initiative, commonly referred to as “voluntary” evacuees. Equally significant, Article 1 of the Act explicitly acknowledges that “the risks posed to human health by radiation from those radioactive materials have not yet been sufficiently clarified scientifically” (Government of Japan, 2012), thereby recognizing scientific uncertainty regarding the health effects of radiation exposure as a legitimate basis for policy intervention. Article 2, Paragraph 2 further affirms the right to evacuate, redefining the moral boundaries within which precautionary decisions about children’s protection were made. Thus, the Act institutionalized both the recognition of uncertainty and the legitimacy of evacuation as a moral and political choice.

However, the Act functioned primarily as a framework law that articulated general principles for supporting the livelihoods of disaster victims. Consequently, the formulation of concrete support measures was delegated to basic policies and implementation plans developed by the relevant ministries and agencies, including the Reconstruction Agency (e.g., Hino, 2014; Toda, 2016b). Although the Act called for the formulation of concrete measures to support affected persons with special consideration for children, policy development was effectively delayed and diluted by the Japanese government, resulting in limited institutional support for those who chose to evacuate (e.g., Hino, 2014; Toda, 2016b).

This policy trajectory unfolded alongside a broader political shift toward emphasizing recovery and normalization. In September 2013, then Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s statement that the Fukushima situation was “under control,” delivered during Japan’s bid for the 2020 Summer Tokyo Olympic Games, symbolically marked the acceleration of a recovery-oriented narrative (Abe, 2024). Within this framework, the continuation of evacuation, “voluntary” evacuation in particular, came to be increasingly positioned as incompatible with national recovery. This discursive shift was institutionalized in March 2017, when, as part

of the return-promotion policy, free housing support for evacuees outside officially designated evacuation zones, including “voluntary” evacuees, was discontinued. Ultimately, reducing the number of evacuees, including mother–child evacuees, came to function as a tacit benchmark of post-disaster recovery. It was within this shifting political and institutional context that media representations of mother–child evacuation acquired particular significance.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study examines mediated discourses surrounding mother–child evacuation in Japan through the lenses of Beck’s (1992) risk society and Silverstone’s (2007) theorization of the mediapolis and proper distance.

Beck (1992) characterizes contemporary society as a risk society, with particular attention to the role of science and technology. In *Risk Society*, he argues that the overdevelopment of science and technology, which once functioned as a central driver of modernization, has paradoxically generated unprecedented forms of risk. Crucially, the scale and scope of these new risks are often scientifically incalculable. Nuclear risk represents a paradigmatic example. As a consequence of advanced scientific and technological development, nuclear disasters produce outcomes whose magnitude and long-term effects are inherently unpredictable and incalculable, while the health impacts of radioactive materials remain subject to scientific uncertainty, as articulated in the Child Victims Support Act. Rather than eliminating uncertainty, scientific and technological progress thus increasingly exposes its own limits. According to Beck (1992), it is under these conditions that contemporary society comes to be structured as a risk society.

Drawing on this perspective, numerous scholars have conceptualized post-Fukushima Japanese society as a risk society (e.g., Abe, 2023b; Beck et al., 2011). Japanese society faces the dual challenge of decommissioning the wrecked Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant while continuing to operate nuclear reactors to secure energy supplies, and this structural tension has profoundly shaped the contours of post-Fukushima Japan. Building on this body of scholarship, this study similarly situates mother–child evacuation within the context of a post-Fukushima Japanese society understood as a risk society. Rather than portraying mothers who evacuated with their children as overly risk-averse actors who allegedly lacked scientific understanding of radioactive materials, this article conceptualizes mother–child evacuation as a precautionary practice shaped by scientific uncertainty and contested forms of risk governance.

Furthermore, this study theorizes the role of the media in post-Fukushima Japanese society. In *Media and Morality*, Silverstone (2007) draws on Hannah Arendt’s understanding of communication and power to reconceptualize global media as a moral space. He advanced the notion of the mediapolis as follows:

The mediapolis is...the mediated space of appearance in which the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness, and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us. It is through communications conducted through the mediapolis that we are constructed as human (or not), and it is through the mediapolis that public and political life increasingly comes to emerge at all levels of the body politic (or not). (Silverstone, 2007, p. 31)

Building on this formulation, Silverstone (2007) conceptualized media as a public space of appearance in which distinctions between “us” and “them” are produced. To further develop the notion of the mediapolis,

he foregrounded the issue of proximity, which structures relations between the self and the other through both difference and shared identity. In this context, Silverstone introduced the concept of proper distance, defined as follows:

The importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation, and responsibility, as well as understanding. (Silverstone, 2007, p. 47)

While Silverstone's work is centrally concerned with the mediated space of appearance and the mediated proximity between "us" and "them," it gives limited attention to the role of gender in shaping these mediated relations. By integrating perspectives from risk society theory and the concept of the mediapolis, together with the notion of proper distance and a gender-sensitive approach, this study examines how major Japanese newspapers portrayed mother-child evacuation in terms of risk, gendered responsibility, and moral distance in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

4. Method

4.1. Dataset

The data for this study were retrieved from the digital repositories of the Tokyo editions of the *Asahi Shimbun*, the *Mainichi Shimbun*, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, and the *Sankei Shimbun*. These five newspapers were selected due to their status as Japan's principal national dailies. Commonly referred to as the country's five major newspapers, they provide valuable insight into dominant media discourses at the national level (e.g., Fujitake & Takeshita, 2018). The *Asahi* and the *Mainichi* are widely characterized as liberal newspapers, whereas the *Yomiuri* and the *Sankei* are generally identified with a conservative orientation. The *Nihon Keizai* occupies a distinctive position as a financial daily (e.g., Fujitake & Takeshita, 2018).

The period of data collection covered articles published over the 10 years following the triple disaster on March 11, 2011, namely from March 12, 2011, to March 12, 2021. During the initial stage of data retrieval, the search focused on articles that explicitly included the term "boshi hinan" (mother-child evacuation). The unit of analysis was the individual newspaper article. This initial search yielded 20 articles from the *Asahi*, 37 from the *Mainichi*, 12 from the *Yomiuri*, 7 from the *Nihon Keizai*, and 13 from the *Sankei*.

To refine the dataset, articles that merely mentioned "boshi hinan" in passing, without substantively engaging with the concept or describing related actors, experiences, or practices, were excluded from the analysis. Specifically, articles were removed if the term appeared only as an undeveloped reference, such as in lists without further elaboration (e.g., "Shūinsen kōyaku tokushū," 2012). After this filtering process, the final dataset comprised 15 articles from the *Asahi*, 25 from the *Mainichi*, 8 from the *Yomiuri*, 5 from the *Nihon Keizai*, and 10 from the *Sankei*. These articles constituted the corpus for the subsequent analysis.

All materials analyzed in this study were publicly available newspaper articles, and no human subjects were involved. Accordingly, ethical approval was not required. The data collection process was completed in January 2026.

4.2. Data Analysis

This study employs Fairclough's (2016) dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis to examine how major Japanese newspapers position those involved in mother-child evacuation in post-Fukushima Japanese society. Fairclough conceptualizes discourse broadly as semiosis and defines semiosis as "an element of the social process which is *dialectically* related to others" (Fairclough, 2016, p. 87, emphasis in original). In doing so, the dialectical-relational approach examines the relationship between semiotic processes and other elements of social practice. As with other approaches to critical discourse analysis, it takes a social wrong, such as "injustice, inequality, lack of freedom, etc." (Fairclough, 2016, p. 88), and its semiotic dimensions as its central analytical focus. Referring to social wrongs as "aspects of social systems, forms or orders which are detrimental to human well-being, which could in principle be ameliorated if not eliminated, though perhaps only through major changes in these systems, forms or orders" (Fairclough, 2016, p. 91), Fairclough highlights the importance of drawing on "relevant bodies of theory in various disciplines to go beyond and beneath the obviousness of the topic" (Fairclough, 2016, p. 92). In addition, the dialectical-relational approach seeks to identify obstacles to addressing that social wrong, to consider whether the existing social order depends on its continuation, and to explore possible ways of overcoming these challenges.

The analytical process unfolded iteratively across three interrelated stages. First, all articles were read multiple times over an extended period, with intervals of several weeks between readings, to enhance reflexivity and mitigate the influence of initial interpretative impressions. This iterative reading process enabled the identification of recurring themes and facilitated the examination of dialectical relations between mother-child evacuation as semiosis and other social elements. A central focus was placed on the representation of key actors, including mothers, fathers, children, and institutional actors such as the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated (TEPCO). During this stage, initial coding categories were developed inductively, focusing on how responsibility, risk, and moral evaluation were articulated in the text.

Second, these preliminary codes were refined into a set of analytical categories: (a) the attribution of responsibility, (b) the representation of hardship, and (c) the positioning of social actors. These categories informed the analysis of the relationships between mother-child evacuation as semiosis and other elements within the broader social order. Close attention was given to patterns of foregrounding and backgrounding. In this study, foregrounding is operationally defined as the discursive emphasis placed on specific actors or issues through repeated mention, detailed description, and narrative centrality, whereas backgrounding refers to their marginalization or omission, including limited presence, indirect reference, or absence from causal explanations.

Third, discursive patterns were further examined in terms of how they were articulated across the corpus over time, with attention to both consistency and variation across newspapers and different phases of the post-disaster period. Rather than relying on isolated examples, patterns were identified based on their recurrence across multiple articles and outlets. To ensure analytical rigor, coding and interpretation were conducted iteratively, with repeated comparison across articles and categories. Special consideration was given to deviant or contrasting cases, such as articles that explicitly addressed the roles of fathers or institutional actors, in order to avoid overgeneralization. While interpretative in nature, the study was

conducted through a systematic and iterative process. This iterative and comparative procedure enhances the transparency and robustness of the findings and aligns with the dialectical–relational approach.

Following this methodological orientation, this study draws on the theoretical frameworks of the risk society, the mediapolis, and proper distance to construct mother–child evacuation as an object of analysis within the Japanese media landscape. Focusing on five major national newspapers published between March 2011 and March 2021, this study systematically examines how those involved in mother–child evacuation were framed in news discourse, with particular attention to how media discourse articulated issues of injustice, responsibility, and moral distance in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

5. Results

Most notably, major Japanese national newspapers framed mother–child evacuation as a social wrong requiring redress. Their coverage frequently emphasized the difficulties faced by mothers who evacuated with their children while their partners remained in their hometowns. In particular, many accounts focused on mothers’ anxieties about the potential health effects of radiation exposure on children, as well as the economic hardship associated with evacuation, among other concerns (e.g., Harumashi & Yamauchi, 2013; “Josei to shigoto (3),” 2012; Kobayashi, 2014). For example, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* introduces various difficulties faced by mothers engaged in mother–child evacuation and concludes the article by citing an expert perspective as follows:

Mieko Takenobu, co-representative of the “Great East Japan Earthquake Women’s Support Network,” which advocates support for women’s employment, and professor at Wakō University, stated that “many women who have evacuated voluntarily experience hesitation and a sense of guilt. Their circumstances and ways of thinking differ, including how long they choose to remain away. In this unprecedented situation, it is necessary to listen to individual circumstances and provide mutual support so that women can secure employment.” (“Josei to shigoto (3),” 2012, p. 14)

By incorporating such expert commentary, the article framed mother–child evacuation as an instance of a social wrong requiring redress, including access to secure employment. As a result, mother–child evacuation was primarily constructed as a set of challenges encountered by mothers as key agents at evacuation destinations. By contrast, only a small number of articles highlighted the challenges faced by fathers who sent their wives and children to an evacuation destination while continuing to live in Fukushima Prefecture (“Kibō shimbun,” 2013; Maeda, 2014). In addition, some articles explicitly addressed mother–child evacuation by focusing on both mothers and fathers (e.g., “Yureru kosodate,” 2015). One article published in 2015, four years after the disaster, stated as follows:

In the accident at the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, approximately 46,000 people from Fukushima Prefecture were forced to evacuate outside the prefecture, and fractures have also emerged within families. “Others are living their lives as usual. If we are to continue this double life, then we should separate.” A woman in her forties who evacuated to Yamagata Prefecture with her two daughters after the nuclear accident was presented with a request for divorce last year by her husband, who had been living alone at their home in Fukushima City. “We decided to evacuate after discussing it as a couple, putting the children first,

but...” At the evacuee support center Oide in Yonezawa City, Yamagata Prefecture, mother–child evacuees who face similar concerns gather. Hiroshi Ueno (50), the center’s secretary-general, says, “Many men are also under stress because they cannot talk about their family situations at work. I hope this can be a place where people can feel that ‘we are not the only ones struggling,’ and use that as a starting point toward finding solutions.” (“Fukkō no danmen,” 2015, p. 39)

When reporting on mother–child evacuation, focusing exclusively on mothers as the subjects of coverage and framing the associated difficulties as problems borne solely by mothers risks marginalizing fathers as participants in mother–child evacuation. By contrast, the article does not depict mothers alone as struggling as a result of the evacuation. Instead, it presents a more balanced account in which fathers are also positioned as actors in mother–child evacuation and are shown to face difficulties comparable to those experienced by mothers. Nevertheless, across the research period examined in this study, major Japanese national newspapers rarely addressed fathers as participants in mother–child evacuation, suggesting that media coverage implicitly presupposed a moral responsibility whereby the burdens and difficulties associated with mother–child evacuation were expected to be borne primarily by mothers.

The questions, then, concern which types of difficulties and challenges faced by mothers were foregrounded in Japanese newspaper coverage over the 10-year period. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus of coverage of mother–child evacuation did not change substantially over time. This continuity reflects persistent and largely unaddressed configurations of the challenges encountered by mothers who evacuated with their children. Most notably, Japanese newspapers consistently highlighted the economic hardship associated with prolonged evacuation, including housing insecurity and employment difficulties (e.g., Inoue, 2020; “Jishu hinansha modoru,” 2015; “Josei to shigoto (3),” 2012). Coverage also frequently addressed mental health-related issues, particularly family-related strain, such as tensions between evacuated mothers and their non-evacuated partners (e.g., Hino & Kiura, 2015; Ōkubo, 2017). These concerns remained a central and recurring feature of newspaper portrayals of mother–child evacuation throughout the research period from March 2011 to March 2021. In addition, some articles highlighted mothers’ anxieties regarding the potential health effects of radiation exposure on children (e.g., “Kibō shimbun,” 2013). Others addressed concerns related to nuclear safety more broadly, including the restart of nuclear power plants, decontamination, the lifting of evacuation orders, and the resumption of everyday life (e.g., “Saikadō zenshin ni ikidōri,” 2013; “Tonai no hinansha,” 2015). These mediated challenges illustrate how different dimensions of mother–child evacuation were selectively foregrounded and repeatedly rearticulated over time. In particular, anxieties about radiation exposure and concerns regarding nuclear safety closely correspond to forms of uncertainty and indeterminacy that are central to theories of risk society.

These mediated challenges were accompanied by specific attributions of gendered moral responsibility. While numerous studies show that dominant gender norms were maintained or even reinforced in post-Fukushima Japanese society (e.g., Morioka, 2014), Japanese newspaper coverage frequently reproduced such norms by framing mothers as primary caregivers who were morally obligated to prioritize their children’s health and well-being. One article, for example, states as follows:

“All I wanted was to raise my children safely and freely, surrounded by nature,” said a 40-year-old woman who had evacuated with her nine-year-old son to her parents’ home in Akita City. In April last year, she moved there from Kōriyama City in Fukushima Prefecture, leaving her husband behind. “*Only a mother*

can protect her children." That conviction guided her decision. Her fourth-grade son now spends his days playing outdoors, covered in mud and dirt. Her husband, however, maintains that there is no need to worry about low-dose radiation exposure. (Yamada, 2012, emphasis added)

Mother-child evacuation was thus consistently presented as a naturalized extension of maternal responsibility, granting moral agency almost exclusively to mothers while largely marginalizing fathers as morally responsible actors in relation to children's well-being. Notable exceptions emerged in a limited number of cases in which fathers were portrayed either as morally responsible for supporting their evacuated partners and children (e.g., Maeda, 2014) or as morally irresponsible, particularly when they were depicted as urging the withdrawal of such support (e.g., Hino & Kiura, 2015). Moreover, although children constituted a central justification for evacuation, their voices remained largely invisible in media discourse, with only a small number of exceptions (e.g., T. Yoshida, 2014). Instead, mothers' voices and narratives functioned as mediating sites through which children's interests and concerns were represented and articulated. These patterns indicate that mother-child evacuation was constructed as a social wrong in profoundly gendered terms in major Japanese newspapers.

More crucially, Japanese newspaper coverage rarely interrogated the moral responsibility of TEPCO or the Japanese government for constituting the very conditions that necessitated mother-child evacuation. Among the 63 articles in the corpus, only five articles published in the *Asahi*, the *Mainichi*, and the *Sankei* addressed these actors, of which three referred to both TEPCO and the Japanese government, while two referred only to the Japanese government. One article explicitly stated as follows:

Mother-child evacuees also face problems such as the absence of fathers and economic hardship resulting from maintaining a double life....Behind the fragmentation of families lies distrust toward the government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated. As troubles at nuclear power plants, including leaks of contaminated water, continue, evacuees are unable to discern a clear path toward the resolution of the accident. Decontamination has been delayed, and anxieties about radiation have not been dispelled. In order to restore family structures, the government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated must regain public trust by working toward the resolution of the accident and post-disaster recovery. (Kobayashi, 2014)

This article stands out in explicitly foregrounding the moral responsibility of TEPCO and the Japanese government for generating the conditions that gave rise to mother-child evacuation. By contrast, the majority of newspaper coverage contributed to the backgrounding of institutional responsibility while foregrounding gendered and individualized accounts of hardship. In doing so, Japanese newspapers consistently emphasized mothers' moral responsibility and suffering, while remaining largely silent about the actors and structures that produced the conditions necessitating mother-child evacuation. Notably, such articles did not explicitly describe mothers engaged in mother-child evacuation as abnormal or exceptional, nor did they position them as incompatible with national recovery. However, by decontextualizing these experiences from the broader historical and political conditions that produced them, such coverage instead adopted a neoliberal perspective that rendered these mothers isolated within post-Fukushima Japanese society, where the moral responsibility of the state and public authorities to compensate and support those engaged in mother-child evacuation has increasingly been obscured and eroded, and where their circumstances are increasingly framed as matters of individual responsibility (e.g., C. Yoshida, 2016).

Accordingly, mothers were frequently constructed as mediated, morally responsible subjects whose experiences were filtered through normative expectations of care and sacrifice, while children appeared primarily as unmediated figures of vulnerability. From a dialectical-relational perspective, this mode of representation can be understood as part of a broader social order in which the social wrong of mother-child evacuation is individualized and depoliticized, while the institutional responsibility of TEPCO and the Japanese government is backgrounded and rendered effectively unaccountable.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Said (1997) conceptualizes “covering” as having a dual meaning: covering as reporting on events, and covering as concealing or obscuring the underlying truths of those events. He uses this conceptual framework to examine how Western media portray and systematically distort Islam. A comparable pattern emerges in Japanese newspapers’ coverage of mother-child evacuation. The findings suggest that Japanese newspapers covered mother-child evacuation in the first sense by foregrounding struggling mothers as individualized subjects of moral responsibility, while simultaneously covering it in the second sense by obscuring and effectively absolving the moral responsibility of their partners, TEPCO, and the Japanese government.

Although mother-child evacuation was implicitly recognized as a social wrong, major Japanese newspapers nonetheless contributed to sustaining an existing social order. Through such representations, mothers engaged in mother-child evacuation became doubly victimized within post-Fukushima public discourse. First, major Japanese newspapers reinforced the normative assumption that responsibility for children’s care rests primarily with mothers, including in extreme cases involving those who later took their own lives. This normative assumption is not unique to post-Fukushima Japan (e.g., Schmidt et al., 2023). At the same time, the notion of motherhood in Japan, grounded in maternal love for children, can serve as a basis for women’s engagement in public issues, including in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster (e.g., Kimura, 2016). While media discourse may have provided symbolic resources for such engagement by reinforcing gendered expectations of care, it simultaneously constrained mothers within a hegemonic framework of motherhood that placed the burden of social responsibility upon them. As a result, the discursive emphasis on motherhood, in which mothers are positioned as primarily responsible for children’s care following the nuclear disaster, may not only have enabled some women to challenge dominant recovery narratives, but also made it more difficult for mothers engaged in mother-child evacuation to critically question the gendered division of care under challenging circumstances in a risk society. Second, the moral responsibility for mother-child evacuation was framed not as deriving from the actions of TEPCO or the Japanese government, but as stemming from individual maternal decision-making. By covering the hardships of these mothers as a social wrong in a largely descriptive manner, without situating mother-child evacuation within the historical contexts that produced its underlying causes, Japanese newspapers did not sufficiently offer a critical perspective from which to interrogate state-led recovery policies, including the restart of nuclear power plants, in relation to mother-child evacuation.

Ultimately, Japanese newspapers’ portrayals of mother-child evacuation functioned as a mechanism of othering that shaped the relationship between those involved in mother-child evacuation and readers. Rather than fostering proximity between them, newspaper coverage often failed to integrate mother-child evacuation into broader and more complex discussions of recovery from the disaster, thereby reinforcing the separation of evacuee families from general readers in post-Fukushima Japanese society. Paradoxically,

however, major Japanese newspapers covered these struggling mothers as some of the most significant actors and even as transcendental symbols within post-Fukushima Japanese society. As such, the visibility and continued presence of these mothers as others, or as figures rendered irrelevant to “us,” operated as a symbolic measure against which the transition to a supposedly “recovered” post-Fukushima society was evaluated. Japanese newspapers thus constructed a particular form of distance between readers and those involved in mother–child evacuation in post-Fukushima society by foregrounding mothers’ hardships while simultaneously making it difficult for the general audience to imagine shared identification with these mothers, let alone with fathers.

The question, then, is how the social wrong can be addressed by attending to the relations between semiosis and other elements of social life. By focusing on the visible and surface-level aspects of mother–child evacuation and largely limiting their coverage to the voices of those directly involved, Japanese newspapers reproduced gender inequality by failing to direct attention to the actors and structures that gave rise to the phenomenon. One possible way forward would be for newspapers, when reporting on mother–child evacuation, to situate the phenomenon within its broader social, structural, and historical context and to critically reflect on whether their reporting practices contribute to the reproduction of neoliberalized gender inequality.

In light of these findings, what kinds of theoretical contributions can this case study make to Silverstone’s concepts of mediapolis and proper distance? As noted, Silverstone’s framework does not sufficiently account for the role of gender in the organization of mediated moral relations. In response, this study advances his conceptualization of mediated space and distance by demonstrating that gender operates as a structuring principle of mediapolis as well as proper distance. Specifically, it shows that mediated representations of mother–child evacuation actively configure relationships between readers and those involved by assigning moral proximity and responsibility primarily to mothers, while rendering fathers, state actors, and institutional agents more distant. In doing so, this study highlights how mediated moral distance is not only a matter of visibility or empathy, but also of gendered attribution of responsibility. This study demonstrates that Japanese media coverage of mother–child evacuation functioned as a gendered mediapolis that moralized individual risk decisions of women by marginalizing men, state actors, and institutional agents from being responsible for the care of the child, thereby contributing to the reproduction of gender inequality in a risk society.

Nearly a decade after the Fukushima disaster, the outbreak of Covid-19 exposed and intensified gendered inequalities in care, with numerous studies documenting how mothers were disproportionately burdened with stress and resilience in Japan and elsewhere (e.g., Childress et al., 2024; O’Reilly, 2020; Yamamura & Tsustsui, 2021). Although this study focuses on a more localized disaster, its findings can be understood as an early precursor to these pandemic-era social realities. Accordingly, the significance of this study extends beyond the specific case of Fukushima. In particular, its findings demonstrate how media discourse had already been structuring expectations that mothers assume primary moral responsibility for protecting children in a risk society. As such, this article contributes to broader debates on how media discourse organizes gendered moral responsibility and reproduces inequality across diverse socio-cultural and temporal settings.

While this study focuses primarily on major Japanese newspapers over a 10-year period, it is based on a relatively small number of articles. Given this limited sample, future research would benefit from incorporating

in-depth interviews with both mothers and fathers involved in mother–child evacuation to examine how they interpreted newspaper coverage of evacuation, as well as focus groups with newspaper readers to explore broader audience responses to such representations. In addition, this study does not fully account for the roles of other media forms, such as magazines, films, and television, in shaping representations of mother–child evacuation following the Fukushima disaster.

Nonetheless, despite a substantial body of scholarship on media and morality, the specific ways in which media operate at a moral level in the context of nuclear disasters characterized by scientific uncertainty remain underexamined. In response, this study draws on the concepts of risk society, mediapolis, and proper distance to illuminate how mainstream media contribute to the production of gendered moral space in the contemporary media environment.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is not publicly available due to institutional restrictions. However, some data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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