



13/10/2012 vol.2

**** Letters from Tohoku: Connecting you and the mothers in Tohoku ****
~ Thinking about independence and aid: from Nagaoka Midwives Association,
Niigata pref. point of view ~



Hello everyone. The weather is finally cooling down as we enter October, and as the days become easier to handle without the heat however, for those of you who live in the area where the typhoon struck a few days ago, we have great sympathy for the victims.

In this issue, in “From the disaster area...” section, we have a story directly from the midwife working in aid in the disaster area right now. Please do have a read to consider the present and the future of Tohoku.



◆ What we have accomplished so far... (As of 30/09/2012)



<Number of mothers received aid>

September: 426 mothers (Total: 1278 mothers)

< Aid coverage>

Iwate pref. (Ofunato, Rikuzentakata, Kamaishi, Otsuchi, Tono)

Miyagi pref. (Ishinomaki, Kisenuma, Watari, Natori)

Fukushima (Iwaki, Soma)

<Aid content>

Parental consultation/ Tea and chat time/ Baby massage/Baby exercise/Mum’ s refresh exercise/
Mum&Baby’ s exercise/Visiting temporary housing



◆ From the disaster area...

< Atsumappe FKG: Nagaoka city, Niigata pref. >



Atsumappe Fukushima Girl is an aid group run by six midwives from Nagaoka Midwives Association, Niigata pref. They host workshops and look after the pregnant women and new mothers evacuated from Fukushima pref. in Nagaoka city. In this issue, we have a report from the representative Ms Tamami Kaneko. Her report contains current experiences



from the mothers who are facing the winter of Niigata pref.

for the first time* and how the “scattered” individual mothers who arrived in Nagaoka city have slowly “joined up”. She also reflects deeply on the aspects of “receiving aid” and “becoming independent”, to make us all think about these important issues in this condensed report. Please do take your time to read until the end.

* Niigata pref. is on the side of the Sea of Japan, hence experiences a much harsher winter and heavy snowfall due to the cold front from Siberia. In comparison Fukushima pref. is relatively warmer as it is facing the Pacific Ocean and the cold from Siberia is blocked by the mountain range in between these prefectures.

Nagaoka city is a city in a central part of Niigata pref. where it stretches from the sea to the mountains. It is the second largest city in Niigata pref. with a population of 280 thousand. It is well known for heavy snowfall in winter but the summer is also very hot. When Niigata pref. experienced two major earthquakes in 2004 and straight after, in 2007, we received an amazing support from all over the country. From such a recent experience, the people here really feel “It is our turn to help” towards the people who experienced the disaster on 11th March 2011.



As Niigata pref. is a neighbour of Fukushima pref., from early on there were many evacuees arriving. As of August 2012, 6283 people out of a total of 6413 people evacuated to Niigata pref. are from Fukushima pref.

◇◆ An understanding from 35 sheets of questionnaires.

April 2011, one month after the disaster was the first time I took some evacuee mothers as patients. There were four pregnant women under the care of city’s charity for the evacuees to whom I begun to give support. I began my usual work as a midwife visiting the place regularly, providing antenatal care and accompanying them to get vaccinations.

While working there, I heard that there were more pregnant women evacuated from Fukushima pref. However due to personal identity protection, the government did not allow us to know the details or the whereabouts of these women. We also did not have any funds for aid work. It was very frustrating not to be able to do anything when we knew that there are many others who need aid. It was around that time, we got connected to Tokyo Satogaeri Project (the predecessor of J’ espère) and I was able to advertise at an event that we were about to start workshops for evacuee mothers. At the same time we were able to obtain information on the evacuee mothers and children, which was very useful for us in order to prepare for our work and to know the ground we were standing on.

Right now I have 35 personal information sheets. I have asked each evacuee mother to fill in a questionnaire in the first two workshops I held in November 2011 in order to understand their

current personal and family situation.

Around half of them have been evacuated just with their children, leaving their husband and the rest of their family behind. Hence their major issue is financial due to the increased cost of having “double households” (one in Fukushima where husband resides due to work and other reasons, and another in Niigata where the mother and children have been evacuated due to concerns over the effect of radioactivity on growing children, for example) and with having to spend money in order for the family to meet with each other. For those who have been evacuated “at their own will” (as they were not living in the area officially declared unsafe by the government) they do not get any compensation from anyone which was also an added worry and frustration reported in the questionnaire.

Some of the mothers commented on the difficulties and how depressing it is to have to stay at home all day alone with children, as they don't have any friends or acquaintances in the city. Hence they ended up visiting place like shopping centres more than necessary as that is about the only place they can go with children. As a result they were spending extra money that they don't really have...

What all of them had in common were worries about the future “ I cannot see how we will ever get out of the current situation or what to expect in the future” and worries about the more immediate future, such as the “snow” and the winter that had just begun.

◇◆ “I have nothing to wear”

In the first winter that the mothers experienced since being evacuated, Nagaoka city had a greater amount of snowfall than the recent years. Their worries had become a reality.

The winter on the side of the Sea of Japan is so much harsher than the winter on the side of the Pacific Ocean (there is a mountain range that separates one side

from another). Until then, we were running two workshops a month but as the winter approached, the number of attendees slowly decreased to below ten mothers on some days.

In our cities, all the main roads have pipes running under them to melt the snow that is setting on the road. It is very convenient for the cars but the pedestrians have to have foot wear which is completely waterproof. Also, the snow in the region of Nagaoga city is very damp, so unless you wear a properly waterproof coat, you will get wet. Nursery children and primary school children wear Skiing clothes during the winter months and it is absolutely essential for them to have very good quality ones in order to survive the winter.

However, let alone preparing clothes suitable for freezing temperatures with heavy snowfall, it was difficult enough for the evacuee mothers to even prepare normal winter clothes.

Last year, when I visited one of the families in the middle of autumn, the mother was wearing a thin t-shirt in a room with a heater already on full blast. My immediate reaction was “I better tell them that their energy bill will be extortionate at the end of the winter if they use so much heating already” so I asked “Do you prefer wearing less clothes and heating up the room instead?”



Their answer was “ I don’ t have anything else to wear” . They were evacuated almost empty handed and totally unprepared. So she told me that this is all she had. I felt really bad to have asked such a question.

I also heard from other mothers “ When we were evacuated, it was the beginning of spring and was only limited space in the car so I did not bring winter clothes” “ We are in a financially difficult situation so I prioritised children’ s goods over mine” etc.

It was around that time, we were told that Tokyo Satogaeri Project was able to give us some funds towards the cost of winter clothes for the mothers. I was utterly overwhelmed with joy and felt that they must have heard our voices!

After confirming the presence of a child on the health record, we were able to distribute the fund to the mothers. In total about 90 mothers and children were granted some money towards obtaining winter clothes. I cannot forget their happy faces when I was handing the funds out to the mothers.

I almost feel that to have managed to provide aid towards the cost of the winter clothes for the families, spending their first winter with a record amount of snowfall even in our region, was the greatest accomplishment in all of our activity so far.

◇◆How “scattered” presence “joined up” to form a family like relationship.

Right now, the workshops are held twice a month in a community centre in the outskirts of the city. Our activities include tea and chat time, seasonal celebrations and activities, and light exercises such as stretch exercises from ballet.

It is not like the mothers were neighbours in Fukushima before coming to Nagaoka city. This means that at the beginning, the midwives were bridging the gaps between



the mothers. After they were evacuated, mothers who were living all across Fukushima pref. were also living just as separately, scattered all over Nagaoka city.

However, as the time passed, the chatting voices became louder and smiles started to return. While our contribution during the workshop as a midwife is only as a childminder and health consultation. The mothers have even started to hang out with one another outside of the workshop too. The workshop really helped to join up the individual mothers.

At first, we discussed whether we should “free” mothers from mothering duties during the workshop or not.

Our thoughts were:

- Whatever the situation, the role as a parent does not change.
- As they have just arrived as an evacuee, there is nobody who will give them advice on parenting.
- It would be good for them to learn about parenting by looking at other mothers.
- We will be sure to miss out on things that we may not be aware of if we separate the mother and the child.

With these points in mind, we decided it is best for them to look after their own children themselves.

Of course, we are always there to help and give them advice. If the child is misbehaving particularly badly, we will also tell them off. We felt that we would like to use our strength as a midwife in order to assist in bringing up children as well as “bringing up mothers” rather than having to focus just on the leisure and the healing aspect of the workshops.

The children who come to the workshop now are the ones who were born after the disaster; they are just over one year old. This means you cannot take your eyes off them even for a moment, as they are so busy moving about. Even when the mothers are immersed in the chats with other friends, they will always keep an eye on their child and if necessary, they will discipline other people’s children too. They really are becoming like one big family.

Recently, I have started to open up the workshops to the local mothers too. I felt that the local mothers will know best about the local “parenting information”. As many of the Fukushima mothers moved their “official home address” to the register in Nagaoka city council as they ended up staying here longer, I felt it is important that they have a connection to the local mothers as well.



The Fukushima mothers say it is really great to get to know the local mothers. “When we are just left with ourselves, we always end up talking about the nuclear power station or about evacuation, but when Nagaoka mums join us, we are able to have normal mum-conversations.” We thought long and hard about the timing of when we should start inviting the local mothers into this group but looking at the way they are enjoying fun times together, it seems that we did it at the right time.

◇◆ “Aid towards independence ... “

Our wish was to provide a space where for even a flicker of a moment the mothers were able to forget about the very difficult situation that they were placed in, after experiencing a great trauma.

Soon, it will be one year since we have started this aid work and I realise now that what we have been doing all this time was “forming a community” .

Through the process of evacuation, the communities that the mothers used to belong to no longer exist for them, but no one can live alone. The feeling of connection between people such as, being and feeling connected with others, feeling that there are always someone who is thinking and caring about them, having someone who when you meet up will always cheer you up etc all act as a living force in people’s lives.

“Aid towards independence” is a slogan that is often used as a goal to achieve when aid is

given to people during a time of disaster. Also, for some reason, aid-givers always expect the victims to accomplish that goal as soon as possible. However, through this aid work, I have strongly understood that it is up to the victims to decide when they are ready to become independent of aid and it should not be decided by aid-givers.

When I had just started this work, I did so much for the mothers and listened to their requests that I almost felt I could be spoiling them. Thinking about it retrospectively, I now think that what I did was a good thing.

The mothers have toughed up so much in comparison to the beginning when they were so helpless. They now go out and about alone, join the local gatherings and events and are really working hard to regain some normality in their lives.

When bringing up children, we say that allowing your child to depend on you as long as they want, in a way they want, actually makes them into an independent adult at earlier stage. I feel the same way about this work.

If a mother expressed “ I don't feel secure enough to go alone... ” then I accompanied her and if she said,

“I think I want to... but do you think it is OK?” my response was always of encouragement and support,

“ Try, I will be here to help you if you need me” .

We kept on going at

their pace without pushing them and now they are on their paths of independence.

Forming a new community and becoming independent

both take a long time. Naturally, aid work also needs to reflect on such time frame. We hope you understand this and are able to support us with a similar relaxed time frame that the mothers of Fukushima really need.



◇◆ Everything was paid off...

Lastly...

One of the mothers who I have been involved with since April last year has given birth to her third baby in Nagaoka city. Her mother and her mother-in-law are both living in Fukushima pref. Hence I took my stance as her mother in Nagaoka city. (This is, in fact, what I always feel towards the mothers in Nagaoka city.)

When her baby was about one month old, she said to me “ I am really happy I chose to give birth in Nagaoka. I have never spent my postnatal period feeling so calm and relaxed. I wish I could have given birth to the other two in Nagaoka too”

As a midwife, you cannot get better complement than this.

I felt “everything was paid off” !





◆ Please help us!



Tohoku Kosodate Project run by J' espère is supporting the local midwives' activity giving aid to the mothers in the disaster area.

Only through your warm support and donation, are we able to continue our work. All the support that you have very kindly given to us is the source of our work force.

So please do help us to spread the word about our work and do share our site with your friends, families and everyone else so that we can continue to give aid to the mothers in the disaster area.

We also welcome your messages and supporting comments about our work so please do visit our site and leave some words for the mothers, midwives and our staff.

Thank you very much.

<http://tohokumama.org/donation.html>



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Contact: info@tohokumama.org/

This is a monthly publication. We receive a monthly report from the local midwives working in the area and so we are able to tell you the most recent stories from the disaster areas on the issue of living and parenting. Please do have a read and look out for our future publications also!

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