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Resilience Galleries: Exploring the Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Child Raising Experiences of Foreign Women in Japan through Art and Storytelling

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1. Introduction

Japan is in the midst of dynamic societal changes. While birthrates within the Japanese population decline and the remaining population ages, the opposite is happening within the rapidly growing community of foreign residents (i.e. those residing in Japan without Japanese citizenship). By the end of 2024, the number of foreign residents in Japan was 3,768,977, reflecting a 10.5% increase from the previous year. As a result, the number of children born to foreign residents in Japan is also increasing. Most recent data from 2023 showed 15,120 births to either a

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mother or father with foreign nationality, and it is estimated that this number will increase to 2,031,492 by 2040 and 3,485,462 by 2065 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2025). We can imagine this number to be even higher considering current data does not include children born to parents that both hold foreign nationality.

While there is a need for maternal and child support services in Japan to adapt to this change, current systems and services have so far not kept pace. Support is unevenly distributed, and many foreign mothers face barriers to safe and comfortable care during pregnancy and early parenthood. Cities with larger populations of foreign residents often have stronger support networks and administrative support. In contrast, areas with comparatively small populations of foreign residents struggle to provide equitable and inclusive services (Iwama 2023). Language and cultural barriers add another layer of difficulty. Hashimoto (2011) reported that many foreign mothers struggled to ask questions to healthcare professionals, understand medical explanations, or trust the accuracy of interpreters. While research in this field is gradually increasing, the majority of it focuses on the perspectives of healthcare professionals or is limited to surveys and qualitative interviews. However, such methods prioritize the researcher's agenda rather than what the research participants themselves actually want to convey. In other words, traditional research methods may not allow foreign mothers to share what matters most to their lived experiences, especially in the context of language barriers.¹

Resilience Galleries was created as a response to these limitations. Inspired by the voice of an Indonesian mother who spoke about how sharing her story brought her strength, the research team sought to empower the voices of foreign mothers in Japan through an alternative avenue of expression: art-based methods. Gillibrand et al. (2023) shows that art-based methods which utilizes mediums such as drawings, photography, and storytelling, allow research participants to communicate experiences in ways that do not rely solely on language, thus capturing richer insights and giving participants more control over how their experiences are represented. Through this method, the *Resilience Galleries* project sought to highlight the pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare experiences of foreign women residing in

Japan. Specifically, the research team set the following project goals:

1. Encourage the expression of experiences through alternative communication methods (i.e., art and storytelling).
2. Create a space to share experiences, create connections, and think together about current and future needs.
3. Create a knowledge archive of the participants' experiences that can be accessed, maintained, and updated even after the official end of the project.

2. Project Timeline

Here, we detail a timeline of the preparations, implementation, and outcome dissemination of the *Resilience Galleries* project. The work was led by Kate Nakasato (KN) with the support of Yuki Shimamura (YS) under the supervision of Yukari Enoi (YE) and Gergely Mohacsi (GM). Members of *Mother's Tree Japan* (MTJ) were consulted for advice throughout the process. A fifth member of the research team supported KN and YS (referred to as 'HS' in this text) throughout the first half of the project.

2023 December

KN, YS, and HS interviewed four Indonesian mothers living in Japan regarding information seeking behaviors during pregnancy. These interviews were carried out under the supervision of YE for an informal research project. During these interviews, one of the mothers cried while recalling her miscarriage experience. Despite her sadness, she expressed feelings of empowerment by telling her story: "When I talk about my pregnancy story... These are not sad tears. I feel like when I remember these things, it makes me cry because I know that I'm stronger. That I got stronger from that time." This statement became the inspiration for *Resilience Galleries*, highlighting not only the resilience that's built during motherhood but also the power of sharing experiences and the significance of being heard.

2024 January to March

KN connected with *Mother's Tree Japan* (MTJ), a non-profit organization (NPO) involved in the support of foreign mothers in Japan through education and advocacy. In March, KN became a volunteer for *Mamo Hart*, which at the time operated as the Kyoto branch of MTJ. Shortly after, KN conceived the idea for a project that would build upon the knowledge gained from the interviews carried out in December. KN proposed the idea to YS, HS, YE, and GM, marking the start of *Resilience Galleries*.

2024 April to July

Preparations for *Resilience Galleries* were carried out by KN, YS, and HS. A project plan was composed along with an ethics review application, which were finalized and accepted by mid-July. Digital recruitment flyers and consent forms in English, simple Japanese (*yasashii nihongo*), Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indonesian were also created during this time. With the cooperation of volunteers from MTJ, translations for the flyers and consent forms were finalized by native speakers of each language (English = KN, simple Japanese = YS and HS, Vietnamese = MTJ volunteer, Chinese = MTJ volunteer, Indonesian = MTJ volunteer). These languages were selected based on the current nationality demographics of foreign residents in Japan, particularly those whose numbers have increased significantly in recent years.

Approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Kyosei Studies, Graduate School of Human Sciences, The University of Osaka was received on 10 July 2024.² Project implementation began after approval from the ethics committee.

2024 August to November

Recruitment flyers with a QR code connected to the consent forms were initially disseminated through MTJ's Facebook page. Further recruitment was then carried out by disseminating the flyers to group chats on the LINE messaging app of Indonesian, Filipino, and Vietnamese communities in Japan (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Recruitment Flyers in 5 Languages

Consent to participate was obtained via response to the consent form via the QR code on the recruitment flyers and confirmed through direct email exchange between the respondents and the research team.

Each respondent (hereinafter referred to as 'artist') was given a simple prompt: 'Express your experience as a mother in Japan through art or storytelling.' The openness of this prompt aimed to allow artists the freedom to select a moment or feeling that was most meaningful to their own experience rather than conforming to a specific research agenda. Furthermore, to minimize language and cultural barriers, we encouraged a diverse range of artistic expression:

- Visual Art: paintings, photographs
- Performance Art: songs, dances
- Literary Art: poetry, stories

Along with their art, artists were asked to write an artist statement. The content and format of the artist statement was not strictly limited to a certain structure, but the following three points were suggested as examples:

- Personal background
- Motivation for the artwork or performance
- Future aspirations, etc.

There was no rule regarding language. In the case that the artists' art or artist statement involved the use of languages other than English or Japanese, translation was carried out by volunteers from MTJ.

In total, eight artists participated in *Resilience Galleries*, sharing with us drawings (1), poetry (1), song and video (1), photography (2), and short stories (3). Following the completion of this phase, Amazon e-gift cards were given to artists (2,000 yen) and MTJ translators (3,000 yen) as remuneration.



Figure 2 Journey of Strength: The Mother on the Move

This is a self-portrait of me commuting to Osaka every day, taking the local train at 7am.

Going to work while pregnant has been a challenge, and as the months went by, that challenge evolved. Also, since I spent about 3 hours on the train every day, most of my pregnancy memories and struggles are somehow connected to commuting to and from work.

In my first trimester of pregnancy, I wanted to get to Osaka as soon as possible, so I would take the express train and ask someone to let me sit down since I was pregnant. But sometimes the people sitting in the priority seat were also elderly, sick, or pregnant, so I ended up having to make the long journey standing up.

So, I decided to leave home early and take an earlier local train. This way, I was always able to travel sitting down from the start of the journey, but there were still some inconveniences that increased as the summer and my pregnancy progressed.

The majority of my second and third trimesters were during the hot, humid summer months. I always get dizzy on public transport, so I prefer to close my eyes and sleep. But in the summer, it was too hot, and I often couldn't relax and got dizzy. The train kept getting more and more crowded as we got closer to Osaka, making it hotter and more cramped.

Even though I was sitting, the train was so crowded that the people in front of me were very close, and if they were carrying their backpacks in front of them, they would sometimes almost hit me on the face with them.

There were also times when people were coughing or sneezing. I wore a mask to prevent infection as much as I could stand it, but sometimes the heat was too much and I felt nauseous or dizzy, so I felt better without a mask.

As the months went by, my belly grew, and it became very uncomfortable to spend an hour and a half sitting on the train. I tried to change my position a little or open my legs more to accommodate my belly, but it was very uncomfortable. Also, at the beginning of the third trimester, I started to suffer from sudden tachycardia, where my heart rate would suddenly increase for no reason. Sometimes I was just sitting, and suddenly I would start feeling my heart racing as if I were running. At that time I would use a fan, drink water frequently, and focus on breathing exercises to lower my heartbeat.

Meanwhile, I could only watch the stations on the screen as they passed by and do mental calculations to see how much time was left until I reached Umeda. Once in the office I could finally sit alone, without any hustle and bustle, to catch my breath, and I would start feeling better.

And in the afternoon, the same story would repeat itself on the way home.

-Irene

2024 December

Artists' art, artist statement, and translations in English and Japanese were compiled into a physical booklet by KN, YS, and HS (Figure 3). The same content was also published on an online website by KN (Figure 4 and Figure 5).³

The physical booklet was sent free of charge by postal mail to artists who requested one, as well as to MTJ. The website was shared with artists and MTJ

directly via email or the LINE messaging app and has remained available for viewing by the general public even after the end of the original project period. It is continuously maintained by KN, acting as a platform for the artists' experiences to be continuously shared and for other mothers who were not initially involved in the project to share their experiences as well.

Preparations for the online workshop were also carried out by KN and YS during this time. Artists were contacted about the workshop directly through email. To encourage the involvement of mothers who did not participate as artists in this project, a second round of recruitment was carried out through MTJ's Facebook page with digital flyers made by KN and YS in English and simple Japanese (Figure 6). Participation in the workshop was voluntary. Those who expressed their desire to participate were encouraged to view the art of the eight artists beforehand via the website.



Figure 3 Resilience Galleries Booklet (Front Cover)

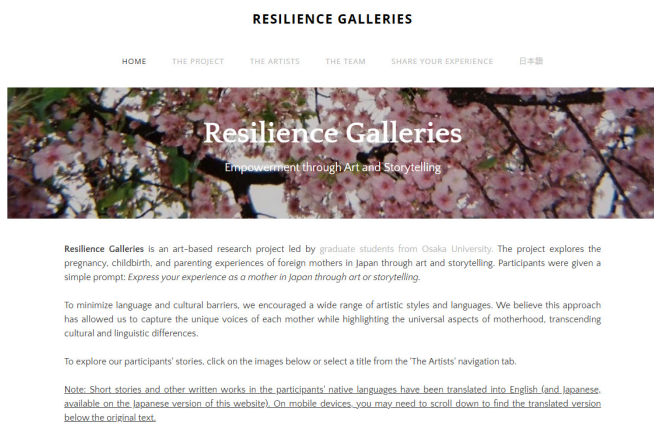


Figure 4 Resilience Galleries Homepage (English)



Figure 5 Resilience Galleries Homepage (Japanese)



Figure 6 Workshop Flyers in 2 Languages

2025 January

The artist workshop was held online via Zoom on 13 January 2025. Six mothers participated in the workshop, four of whom participated in *Resilience Galleries* as artists. Artists who participated in the workshop were given 1,000 yen Amazon Gift Cards as remuneration.

The workshop was divided into three parts:

- Artist Introduction
- Breakout Room Discussions
- Group Discussions

First, participants briefly introduced their art or stories to the group. Second, participants were divided into two groups of three along with KN and YS as a moderator for each group. Third, participants came back together as a group and expressed their thoughts regarding how they felt participating in this project as a whole and necessary support measures for maternal and child care in Japan. A post-workshop survey written in English and simple Japanese was sent to workshop participants after closing.

4. Post-Workshop Survey

We received responses to the post-workshop survey from four out of the six workshop participants. Here, we share some examples that speak to the essence of the project. Any names mentioned are those of artists who explicitly indicated how they wished to be named in project-related documents.

1. What did you enjoy most about the workshop?
 - ☐ “[Seeing] other participant’s artwork and [listening] to their reason behind that. Because the artworks are so emotional and intimate.”
 - ☐ “I [enjoyed] creating the artwork and [describing] it to [everyone]. I also [enjoyed] listening other’s [stories] about their artwork and experience as a mother [living] in Japan.”
 - ☐ “Hearing stories and experiences from other international moms in Japan. Everyone had a very different experience and it was very encouraging to hear from them.”
2. What about the workshop could have been improved?
 - ☐ “Maybe the discussion [could have been] longer. 2 hours [would have been] fine. Because this kind of workshop and discussion is quite rare, especially when it comes to [discussions between different] nationalities.”
 - ☐ “It would have been nice to hear also the experiences of Japanese moms and Japanese people. Also Japanese medicine professionals.”
3. How did your feelings change about your experience being a mother in Japan before vs after the workshop?
 - ☐ “There are always ups and downs. But, everything is almost perfect because the government and healthcare providers always help and care about our difficulties.”
 - ☐ “I want to try to be more proactive and get more involved in

Japanese society by participating in some programs and classes organised by the city hall.”

4. Did participating in the workshop give you new insights or perspectives?

If so, please share.

- “Yes! Every woman has their own struggles; commuting 2-3 hours by train while pregnant [like Irene] is definitely not [an easy thing] to do with the heat, morning sickness and other things. And later when she has to work and also pick up her son [from preschool]. That’s really something.”
- “I like the name of the research topic, “Resilience Galleries”. Because what mothers do is not [an easy thing] to do. We realize it, we make a mindful and conscious decision when we marry and [become] a mother, and yet we still cry, struggle, be resilient. But it’s all worth it! We have to be resilient for whatever [comes], survive, strive, and give our best. Because I believe our kids are blessing from God. He knows we’re able to be a mother and give our best to our kids.”

5. Did you make any connections with other participants during the workshop? If so, please share.

- “Yes, especially with Afifah and Mardiaty. I almost cried from Afifah’s poem when she read it because I also miss my family back home. But, on the other hand, I am creating my own family here now. I identified with Mardiaty because my kid also will have [food restrictions] due to Indian culture: they don’t eat beef. So I will also have to prepare [lunch] for him sometimes instead of eating the food provided by the nursery or the school.”

6. What topics or themes would you like to see explored in future workshops or research?

- “How foreign moms can be connected from all over Japan, not just in the [local] area.”

5. Discussion

By exploring the pregnancy, childbirth, and child-raising experiences of foreign mothers in Japan through art and storytelling, the *Resilience Galleries* achieved its initial goals of 1) encouraging expression through alternative communication methods, 2) creating a space to share experiences and think together about current and future needs, and 3) establishing a knowledge archive that remains accessible beyond the end of the project. These outcomes are preserved by the *Resilience Galleries* website, which can be accessed by stakeholders in maternal and child health as well as the general public.

The participants' narratives and artworks highlight the everyday realities of foreign mothers in Japan, where pregnancy, birth, and childcare intersect with migration and cultural adaptation. Their accounts point to challenges such as long commutes during pregnancy, birth complications under pandemic restrictions, and limited accommodation of dietary needs in schools. At the same time, participants expressed resilience through faith, care, creativity, and identity work. Art and storytelling allowed the participants to express both vulnerability and strength, moving beyond oversimplified notions such as 'women are weak' or 'mothers are strong.'

Workshop feedback supports the value of participatory spaces. Participants described creating and sharing their work as empowering, and listening to others as encouraging. Some reported renewed appreciation for available healthcare and government support, while others expressed motivation to engage more actively in community programs. Requests for longer sessions and the inclusion of Japanese mothers and healthcare professionals suggest both the rarity and potential of such dialogue.

It should be noted that labels such as "foreign residents" or "foreign mothers" do not adequately reflect the full diversity of people who immigrate to Japan. We use these terms here because of their common usage in Japan, but emphasize the need for more inclusive and accurate language going forward. Consequently, the *Resilience Galleries* project in its current form may not fully capture the experiences and needs of individuals with more marginalized sociocultural identities and

socioeconomic capacities. Beyond expanding the scale of projects like the *Resilience Galleries* project, we also call for more nuanced and inclusive research in the future.

Overall, the *Resilience Galleries* project provided a modest but meaningful platform for foreign mothers to reflect on their experiences, connect with one another, and create a record of their lives in Japan. While limited in scale, it points to the value of further developing participatory, intercultural approaches that can complement existing forms of maternal support.

Endnote

- 1 For a systemic review on cultural and language barriers in reproductive health in the European context, see Barrio-Ruiz et al. 2024; for an ethnographic case study of Latin American migrant mothers in the U.S. seeking prenatal care, see Cerdeña 2023.
- 2 Registration Number: OUKS24022
- 3 English Webstie: <https://resiliencegalleries.weebly.com/> / Japanese Website: <https://resiliencegalleries-jp.weebly.com/>

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