



Shaping Futures with Local Women

Disaster Recovery and Women's Empowerment 2011-2020

Women's Eye

A Message from the Director

When I'm asked, "why women's empowerment?", I reply that ridding Japan's regions of inequality requires more women have the power to change society. With so few in the rooms where decisions are made, the pace of change is too slow, and we've yet to lay the foundations for women to be active. First and foremost, it's essential that women in the regions can live authentically, without negating their potential. We have worked day and night for the last ten years on precisely this kind of empowerment. Through doing so, we've helped empowered women to reevaluate how their regions should be according to their own values, to do what they need to, and to pass the baton to the next generation. That generation will surely transform Japan's regions in ways that we cannot even imagine. We already know that women have this potential and are beginning to use their power to make society better.

In this booklet, you will find practical examples of such women's empowerment. I hope that our experiences will help others also trying to empower women, even if only a little.

Megumi Ishimoto

Executive Director & Co-Founder
Women's Eye



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The Grassroots Academy Tohoku training for young women held in Fukushima in 2016
Photo: Hiromi Furusato

Making “roots” for all women

The empowerment women need today

The non-profit association Women's Eye (WE) supports women who want to better their areas, with a focus on Miyagi Prefecture's Minamisanriku Town. Women's Eye are actively promoting “empowerment.” They began their journey listening to the “unheard voices” of women in evacuation centers following Japan's 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Over time, they realized that the struggles those women faced were not unique to small towns in northeastern Japan. They derived from deeply-rooted problems found all over the country.

Interview, text: Yasuko Tamaiko

The shock of realizing that “I can't leave the house freely” is still a commonplace sentiment

—As the name suggests, the vision of Women's Eye (or “WE”) is creating “a society where women use their capacities and play active roles” through foregrounding those “women's ways of seeing.” I asked them to explain the history behind their founding.

Megumi Ishimoto (hereafter, Ishimoto): The spark was when we worked as emergency volunteers after the Great East Japan Earthquake. In May 2011, I headed for an evacuation center in Miyagi Prefecture's Tome City because I felt like I needed to do something after such a disaster. During the time I worked as a volunteer, I moved to the area to become leader of a team supporting women.

We created this team because in both the evacuation centers and the reconstruction process, women's

perspectives barely featured. Daily goods that women needed were not being delivered properly to those centers, but women didn't say anything. No, they couldn't say anything. I was shocked by this, which is why “valuing women's perspectives” became the core of what we do.

—So, listening to the voices of women and supporting their independence become the goal of WE's reconstruction support. Could you give some specifics regarding what kinds of things you did?

Ishimoto: In the early days, we did things like delivering daily necessities to the evacuation centers, listening to people's experiences. As the number of people living in temporary housing increased, we thought we would try and get them to leave their houses and form connections. We held workshops in things like crafts, cooking, and exercise that people were interested in or had as hobbies. Although the groups were really small, little by little horizontal relationships between people

emerged.

We put a lot of effort into creating well-ventilated, comfortable settings where people could talk openly. It might sound very simple, but for example, just having tasty sweets made an atmosphere where people could more easily connect with each other. We started by trying to make space for people to think, “my family is important, but it's also OK to have a little time for myself and to try my hand at something.”

After we incorporated in 2013, we also started holding



Megumi Ishimoto

Born in Wakayama, WE's Executive Director. After ten years working for a company, she established the incorporated non-profit organization Women's Eye alongside like-minded citizen volunteers. One of Japan's W20 delegates since 2019.

discussion groups for women asking “how can we reconstruct our towns into places where we live better?” For instance, study groups about using women’s ways of seeing to revive their hometowns, etc.

Why were there so many problems with “reconstruction support for women”?

–Those small meetings were linked to women’s empowerment, right? But depending on people’s cultural background and habits, were there also difficulties?

Michiko Kuribayashi (hereafter, Kuribayashi): Yes, we had to grope our way forward. After the disaster, there were many support activities like ours. For instance, events promoting the development of entrepreneurship among women in affected areas. Lots of seminars were held about career development and improving skills, things like accounting or vocational training. But there were many women for whom making time for themselves and leaving the house itself was difficult, and people didn’t really attend those events...On the flip side, some women would take a course and that would be the end of it, it wouldn’t lead to anything. Something wasn’t working.



Michiko Kuribayashi

WE’s bureau chief, originally from Wakayama. After helping to found WE, quit her job in international cooperation and moved to Miyagi Prefecture. Works at WE’s base in Minamisanriku Town. Head of bakery/patisserie oui. Certified career consultant.

Miki Shiimoto (hereafter, Shiimoto): For us, we hoped that people would not only take courses. We hoped that as a result of taking them, they would also want to create jobs or activities boosting their areas. In fact, we met many people who told us that they “wanted to help their areas recover,” and a lot of those people had good ideas and talents. But on the other hand, many women also had a strong desire to avoid drawing attention to themselves or standing out...and so it wouldn’t really work out.

Ishimoto: However small the activity or project, we saw how hard it was for women to keep it going. The media likes to promote easy-to-understand success stories about “the brilliance of women in the disaster regions,” but that can perversely create pressure, and we also saw women who didn’t continue their activities and suchlike because they couldn’t stand the scrutiny of people around them. When women stand out, it can become hard to gain understanding from those people. If you hit the wall, you have no companions ready to empathize or provide help.

That’s why we decided to help women who had taken the first step to realize that “I’m going to be fine.” And in 2015, we started the Grassroots Academy



Miki Shiimoto

Director of WE, originally from Fukuoka. After working for publishing houses and editorial companies, traveled and lived in Vietnam, Libya and Pakistan. Co-founded WE after working as a volunteer. Alongside planning and publicity, responsible for handcrafts, market-related activities, and the Women’s Small Business Project (2013-2018).

Tohoku (see p30).

We need our own roots to connect with others.

“Grassroots Academy

–What kind of project was the Grassroots Academy Tohoku?

Sachiko Taura (hereafter, Taura): The theme was building up people’s ability to recognize what it meant to live authentically, and giving them a foundation to speak from, while also building relationships.

Ishimoto: At the beginning, in 2015, we invited women leading grassroots community movements around the world to gather for a training. Through referrals from prefectural coordinators, we also recruited young women from the three prefectures of Iwate, Fukushima, and Miyagi who were leading projects and businesses, however small, to participate in the training.

Since then, we’ve held eight domestic training camps, expanding our reach through introductions from previous participants. Furthermore, we’ve held overseas trainings in Seattle in 2017 and Los Angeles in 2018.



Sachiko Taura

WE director, originally from Kumamoto. As a training facilitator, she leads courses based on NVC (non-violent communication). Responsible for the Grassroots Academy Tohoku program. Certified Connection Practice trainer.



The 2017 Academy in Miyagi, held in Yamamoto Town

Schedule-wise, these weren't events that everyone could take part in. But people arranged for their children to be looked after, etc., and we had lots of participants.

Shimoto: There are a great many young women who have something they want to do, but if they raise their voice, they become isolated locally. I think that lack of companions is a big part of why so many people feel insecure when they start projects. During the academies, people stay three days. So, they have time to get together, talk while eating and drinking together, not only during the training program, but also in their free time. That's incredibly important. By talking with each other, they encourage each other to become stronger. The word "grassroots" doesn't only refer to grassroots activities, it also has the meaning of properly looking after each person's roots.

Taura: In the academy, we do various work to know ourselves, know what kind of people we are, warts and all. We put a lot of effort into helping people to recognize themselves.

One woman in her mid-twenties, who had participated in an academy for the first time, said to me, "for the first time in my life, I've found her a place where I feel safe." She realized that whatever happened, she could express her feelings there.

When that woman returned to her home and job, her colleagues and friends were apparently shocked at how much brighter she seemed. She was at peace with herself and could speak out. And I heard that some of her friends raising children and unable to leave their houses were impressed by the figure she cut. They were influenced to try and go out themselves, and apparently joined a salon where mothers would gather. Even if only one person decides to live authentically, their influence spreads in this way. Real empowerment works its magic slowly, from the inside out, I think.

Kuribayashi: One participant started a small business after the disaster. At the time, there was a lot of gossip about her in the region, and hearing those rumors made her depressed. But as she slowly gained more customers, townsfolk that hadn't approved of what she was doing gave her respect. Finally, her partner, who until then had done nothing at home, began to do things like preparing simple meals when she was busy at work, looking after the family.

Ishimoto: In reality, the hardest things to change are those like the power balance in a family, partners' ways of thinking, their behavior. But through changing these, women can gently exert influence on their surroundings. Just like when friends see their radiant figures, and the women around them think, "I want to change too." Through the Grassroots Academies,

women not only from our base in Minamisanriku but also the three prefectures and abroad can mix with each other, gain knowledge, and expand their networks, and this has the effect of broadening their horizons.

Putting what you want to do into practice. How women's voices resonate

—WE's office was established in Minamisanriku Town in 2017. What kind of examples can you give us of local women changing, particularly in Minamisanriku?

Kuribayashi: I can talk about several cases where we helped young women in the town to realize their ideas or goals. For instance, the Childrearing for All Festival (p22), which has been running since 2015, and the cooperative bakery and patisserie oui, which opened in 2017.

Ishimoto: Kuribayashi has really laid down roots since moving to Miyagi, so she took the initiative and nurtured both projects.

We organized the Childrearing for All Festival together with a group of three mothers from Minamisanriku Town. It was a huge success. Although childrearing events on the topic of babies had been held before, there had been no events targeted at the families raising those children.

Taura: The perspectives of the mothers actually participating weren't incorporated into childrearing events before. But the Childrearing for All Festival was cute



The 2020 Childrearing Festival, held right before the COVID-19 outbreak

and fun, and there was delicious food...Mothers from other areas were really jealous, and wanted to do the same thing themselves.

Kuribayashi: The three mothers who first planned the “Childrearing for All Festival” were active women already concerned about the situation of the town and children after the disaster. That’s why they proposed making time for everyone from children to adults to have fun and for not only mothers, but also families and neighborhoods, to look after the children, and put together an event like this. But it took quite a lot of time to get there.

The reason why is that, when you get involved with local areas, people there can be cautious towards “supporters from outside.” If you don’t build trust first, they won’t speak their minds. I realized that if you don’t talk with people regularly, and first take the time for them to get to know you, you won’t be able to create projects together.

Ishimoto: But in the end, it all worked out. When we put out word on social media, it spread right away. In a town with such a small population, 489 people gathered for the first festival. There were also mothers who came from neighboring areas. And afterwards, events

were held by others who wanted to try the same thing themselves in towns like Rikuzentakata and Kesennuma City.

Shiomoto: Things started happening naturally, outside of WE. That’s impact, that’s what we wanted. By organizing and running things themselves, local mothers can win understanding and respect from those around them. And this has ripple effects where other women want to take part and become active. That’s what we’re really aiming for, for things to connect in that way, and it’s what we feel the happiest to see.

“Resilience” born from small businesses

–I also heard that the bakery/patisserie oui is growing.

Ishimoto: The project was started by young women from the area who said, “we want to eat delicious bread.” Kuribayashi took the lead, and started things small, deciding from 2015 to run baking technique classes, looking for people that could teach them, and gathering seven pupils who love breadmaking.

Kuribayashi: They learned bread-making skills that went a step beyond a hobby. During that period, the students felt like they wanted to sell the bread at markets. So, they looked for places that had manufacturing permits, traveling as far as a neighboring city to make bread. However, to make this sustainable, they needed their own equipment and location, and raising money for this was a big hurdle. That’s why we decided to build a bakery/patisserie with a manufacturing license. Not only the group formed through our classes but also

other individuals and groups who wanted to try their hand at running a food business could use it.

The time women raising children or with other jobs have to work is limited. But even so, the women registered to use the venue continue to work there at their own pace, no matter how small-scale.

Taura: One person opened a new bakery in Kesennuma (p29, left below) after gaining experience in making and selling bread at our bakery. At first, her family didn’t appreciate this, and said things like, “you’re going to leave home to have fun making bread?” But when her customers began praising her, telling her that “it’s delicious, you make great bread,” she told us that she also won recognition from her relatives.

Ishimoto: In the end, praise from family is the hardest thing to obtain. Until outsiders value what you do, it’s difficult to be recognized, you see. This is not something confined to Japan or Tohoku. Women who came to Japan from Chile for a documentary project said the same thing to us.

We invited women who started a restaurant in a small



One of the groups using bakery/patisserie oui, Kokomugi, participates every year in the Hikoro Marché

town devastated by the Chile Earthquake and Tsunami, and they also said that they faced backlash, with people saying “why would women run a restaurant?”

But women are strong. After the disaster, we heard that people lacked energy due to only eating cold food. So, the group had a single-minded focus on making hot food for everyone, and kept going with the restaurant. Over several years of mutual aid, it grew, to the extent of hiring employees. And as a result, the mothers told us that they finally won recognition from the community and gained a voice within it.

Shiomoto: When people lose everything in a crisis like a disaster, women are actually the ones who have the strength to get back up. It can start with something as simple as “I want everyone to at least feel better through eating something hot.” Maybe women have the power to recover from or resilience against depression.

What true “women’s empowerment” means

–There are women who can use their strengths, even if only in small ways at first. That’s what you’ve seen through your work to date, right?

Shiomoto: When you say “women’s empowerment,” there are people who imagine things like running a big business, realizing fantastic dreams. But in reality, it’s not limited to those.

Empowerment also means that when you want to do something, you can recognize that, convey it to other people, and put it into motion. And tiny steps are OK.

It’s also OK if, for instance, you give up mid-way, or things don’t go as you expected. What matters is that people don’t live how others tell them to, but according to decisions they’ve made themselves. They’re living authentically. That’s how I understand “independent women.”

It’s OK if you’ve got weaknesses, if you can’t do things well. It’s about whether you can recognize that those things are also part of you. But many people find that scary. That’s why we think it’s our role to help by creating spaces where people can validate each other.

Ishimoto: It’s fine if everyone doesn’t know the name Women’s Eye. But I hope that by providing a place where people can relax and be themselves, when they want to give back to their areas, they will know they can come to us to get the information and connections that they need. Through things like this, I think that women can gain strength and become key players in Japan’s regions.

Over the last eight years, women who’ve participated in our actions have made new friends and connections, returning to their families and workplaces stronger and continuing to challenge themselves. I think this is our real achievement. But it’s not the kind of easy story like, “I set up a business with this much annual turnover.”

Kuribayashi: When we say, “we help women’s actions” and “we value women’s voices,” we sometimes get asked, “is your target only women?” It’s not only about women doing well. When women become truly independent, we realized that they shine brighter, they gain a voice, and as a result, their households become



happier, and there is a benefit to regional society. Over the last eight years, during my involvement in Minamisanriku, this process has been clearly visible.

Taura: Making places where people express and validate themselves doesn’t mean debating in a windowless, square, white-walled meeting room, you know. It’s about talking in a good place with an airy, relaxing atmosphere, eating food and drink that people have poured their heart into making. Making a place like that might seem “a simple thing” to some, but in fact it’s incredibly important.

Ishimoto: We couldn’t have done otherwise, but precisely because we’ve done these kinds of thing, everything has gone well. By following each individual’s life story, and trying to help better those lives, if only a little, we’re changing the local culture from the inside, one step at a time.

By listening to the stories of participants and understanding how they’ve changed, I’ve recently become able to feel the results of our empowerment programs. Through amassing the stories of such role models, I’d like to pass on the meaning of what we, Women’s Eye, have done to date.

Special interview

Women's Eye's activities have been shaped by the support of women leaders worldwide working on disasters, resilience, and regional development. We asked two of them about Women's Eye's activities and empowering grassroots women.

Giving the voice to the grassroots women



Interview with
Sri H. Sofjan

Senior Program Administrator
and Strategist of Huairou
Commission
<https://huairou.org/>

For 20 years, Sri has worked in the fields of human settlements, gender equality and information technologies. In 2012, she became the first CEO of Penang Women's Development Corporation, established to engender public and private sector policies and programs. Sri was the Program Manager of the United Nations Women's Development Fund, now known as UN Women, in Aceh, Indonesia. She served as Program Officer for the Urban Governance Initiative (TUGI). Sri is currently a member of the Advisory Group on Gender Issues of UN-Habitat and of the UNDP's Local Governance and Local Development global working group.

– How did you first connect with NPO Women's Eye?

We found each other in September 2014 through an introduction by an international NGO. The Huairou Commission (HC) was looking for a grassroots women's organization, and Megumi Ishimoto, co-founder and executive director of Women's Eye, was looking for women working on disaster risk reduction.

I had already visited Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture, in March 2014, when I was invited by the Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC), to give a presentation in the seminar as one of the representatives of Global Network and HC.

As the founder of Community Practitioners Platform for Resilience within UN Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), HC was planning to organize Grassroots Academy when we were to participate in the 3rd World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai City.

Megumi wrote to us and visited us in our office in New York City. Whenever we organize our Grassroots Academy, we look for a local partner. A perfect match, Women's Eye became our partner.

– How do you work through Grassroots Academy?

We put grassroots women at the forefront to share their experiences and practices. We then invite policy makers and donors to listen to them.

We have implemented this methodology for more than 20 years. While grassroots women have literacy skills, they most often have no college degrees or professional accreditation.

However, these women are the ones on the ground, planning, solving problems usually with innovative practical solutions and looking ahead. It is very important that they share opportunities where they are respected and recognized as experts with real life experiences. Policy makers must listen to them, not only to the researchers or academics with Ph.D. or members of NGOs.



Inspection to tsunami hit area 2015, Minamisanriku, Miyagi

So we began working with Megumi and Women's Eye to put together a Grassroots Academy to empower women in the Tohoku region after the Great East Japan Earthquake, while linking them with empowered grassroots women around the world to inspire and learn from each other.

– What impressed you most about the women in the devastated Tohoku region? How did they inspire you?

We saw the resilience, strength and determination of the women in Tohoku to build back for their families and communities.

It was very encouraging to learn about how they worked together to secure safe and comfortable space and, at the same time, also inspiring to see how they realized the importance of organizing. Rather than working individually, women can feel much stronger, especially when they work together. Sometimes, at the

beginning, you may see competition where they want to move individually. The exchanges in the Grassroots Academy enlighten those who are not so used to community development with the idea that organizing is the key to building your strength. When women are organized, their voices are amplified and people, especially authorities, listen to them.

They become the eyes and ears of the communities through our mapping methodology and transform themselves into an essential body of their community. As they gain knowledge, the authorities have to seek their expertise to determine where to deliver resources or who to support.



Visiting temporary housing at Tome Miyagi

– Do women experience any difficulties when they try to organize?

Patriarchy remains in the societies where we work and we have our members –Japan, Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

I think women in these countries all share frustration

when they are met with difficulties caused by that culture and tradition. Organizing and building alliances is how we start overcoming challenges. We still see that men decide for women, not showing much interest in listening to what we have to say and try to put us in submissive positions.

WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING

Men still make up the majority of policy makers. As this is also shared with Japan and other countries where we have our partners, women build camaraderie, the idea that they are in this struggle together. Even when they don't speak the same language or come from the same culture, they still share the sense of determination to live better, give their families and communities a safer place where their opinions are heard and valued so that they can gain access and better control resources.

– Why is it important for grassroots women to organize?

Organizing is the starting point to bring together a collective voice and design the conversation they have with the local authorities. They can claim their place where they can learn about development policies and to understand budgeting.

We link them with the global policy, which helps the grassroots women gain recognition for their leadership from their national governments. This provides an opportunity to show the potential these women have so that they can be invited to take part in the development

committees and show presence in the decision-making mechanism.

At times, it is difficult to work on the challenges at the national level, so we take matters to the global or regional level through policies such as SDGs, looking at the goals as the pandemic has regressed some of the progress we have already made.

While assessing the global policies, especially on disaster recovery, we advocate for women to sit in these policy-making spaces whenever possible because these women are the voices the political leaders must listen to. We make sure the grassroots women are the first to speak there so that policy makers cannot leave without learning about the results of local actions and the allocation of resources.

For instance, this year, the Sendai framework for DRR is undergoing a review so we make sure the grassroots women understand what is reviewed and what is not



Grassroots Academy held at Minamisanriku Miyagi, 2015, on occasion of WCDRR Sendai

achieved. All these global policies mention ‘community participation,’ but we see this is sometimes lip service. If the women are only consulted and not incorporated in the national plan, that is not real participation. We want real participation, where local-led action is supported and resourced, with women sitting in the decision-making position.

– What can the women in Tohoku learn from their counterparts in the US and other developed countries?

In the US, the National Congress of Neighborhood Women is the HC member in New York City, where they are trying to bring in the younger generation and build a sense of community to protect their space. They share similar struggles and challenges with women in Minami-Sanriku, Miyagi Prefecture.

During the height of the global pandemic, they organized community kitchens, supplies for families with older people and disabled members, as well as single mothers, as they are very much impacted. The majority of them are caregivers who have double burdens with school closures and family members having to spend more time at home.

SOLIDARITY, A KEY TO STRENGTH

To build alliances and partnership, we cannot stop organizing. It creates a positive cycle where the organized also start organizing. HC offers a leadership development program, where mentors support mentees to ensure the gains made are sustained and strengthened.

– What are the challenges women face when trying to organize?

We hear criticisms. Even women policy makers don’t necessarily take grassroots work seriously saying it’s just volunteer work. OK, women are volunteering, but they are doing this for a reason. They want to improve their livelihoods and the quality of life. They continue to contribute, and we have proven this through the evidence-based demonstrative project.

At the same time, we also have to understand the intersectionality of women with different levels of privileges, race, ethnicity, class, family structure, or academic background.

We must not forget that we need to focus on empowering women. If women political leaders have constituencies that are a women-strong hold, they can work to their advantage in solidarity with grassroots women. Working together makes us stronger. Policy makers should understand that this is not a competition and that they shouldn’t use the organized grassroots groups just to gain the power they want.

– How do you fight against this difference in sense of values and principles?

It’s still a struggle in many societies. The key is to empower women and for them to advance themselves, their families and communities. Advocating the feminist principles to men while not making them our enemy is a strategy. This is about building a community where women are recognized and valued for their



Visiting reconstruction activity group at Tome Miyagi

contributions and leadership in the same way as men are.

We first focus on women, to empower them so that they become their own voice and make themselves heard. If their expertise is recognized, their opinions must be taken seriously, and people will realize that they are doing this for their families and communities. This is how women get elevated.

– What are your strategies to expand women's movement across the globe?

The key is to continue building alliance laterally and vertically with those who share common visions and also with women in the local government.

With social media networks, it has become much easier even though there is still a digital divide.

One of our strategies is to document by recording. It's very important to document what these women are going through, but it is difficult, even for professionals, to document by writing. So we train the women to document their work with smartphones and videos. They will produce short video clips with messages they want to convey to the audience.

AT THE CENTER OF MOVEMENT

We need to advocate to the government for better access to technology maximizing tools for women and girls. It'll help them understand policies through

learning, especially about how to read a government budget and where the money is allocated. That is a very basic need in organizing, but certainly empowering them to understand whether the government money is spent for them and their needs. It will eventually lead grassroots women to contribute to transforming policies.

– What makes Grassroots Academy an essential part of organizing women?

We bring the women to the center of movement. Policy makers want to speak for the grassroots, but never introduce or make space for grassroots women themselves to speak for themselves. Even researchers think of grassroots women as subjects of their research.

We must have women speak, especially those from the organized grassroots groups. We have to look for these people, support them and give them the confidence to speak in public. Many say this is the first time they hold a microphone or speak in front of a large audience.

At HC, we help our member groups provide the opportunity for women to build courage and prepare to speak in policy-making spaces.

If the situation allows us to travel this year, we are hoping to have participants at the global Grassroots Academy for the UNDRR Global Platform scheduled to take place in Indonesia. We are hoping to have leaders from Women's Eye.

Interviewed by Chie Matsumoto (Unfiltered), 15.Feb.2022

Changing the System for Everyone



Interview with
Dr. Lucy Jones

Founder of the Dr. Lucy Jones
Center for Science and Society
<http://drlucyjones.com/>

The mission of Dr. Lucy Jones Center for Science and Society is to foster the understanding and application of scientific information in the creation of more resilient communities. She is the author of the book, *The Big Ones* (Doubleday, April 2018) and is also a Research Associate at the Seismological Laboratory of Caltech, a post she has held since 1984. Working with both the public and private sectors, Dr. Jones seeks to increase communities' ability to adapt and be resilient to the dynamic changes of the world around them. The aim is to understand and communicate where the greatest vulnerabilities lie and what actions can be taken to reduce the risk that are the most cost-effective.

– How did you first meet Women's Eye and how has your relationship with them developed?

My work at the US Geological Survey (USGS) included the Great California Shake Out, an event and earthquake drill where all the science was combined into a story of what would happen in a big earthquake so people could understand it better, resulted in a national program called Science Application for Risk Reduction (SAFRR). It was a collaboration with scientists from different fields, which was unique, and led to a partnership with the City of Los Angeles to create seismic resilience legislation. Because of that work, I was invited to give a series of lectures at Tohoku

University in 2015. There I met Jackie Steele, a political scientist doing research on Women's Eye, and she introduced me to Megumi Ishimoto and told them about my work.

I was again invited to Japan in February 2016 for a Grassroots Academy. The attendees were all entrepreneurs, so I wasn't sure what I could offer. They said, though, that they wanted to see that you could be a successful woman with a successful career and high visibility, and raise a family. But I'm also a seismologist, so we also talked about the earthquake and the science of earthquakes to make them more understandable and more manageable.

After I retired from the USGS and created a nonprofit center in 2017, we had a Grassroots Academy here in Los Angeles, and a group of women came over. One of my friends and colleagues is a woman who is the head of Emergency Management for Disney Corporation, so Disney gave us hotel rooms at Disneyland and the women got to spend a day at Disneyland as well.

– What activities or activism have you supported or done with Women's Eye?

One of the things we did when the Women's Eye group came here was a gathering of these Japanese women with California women in Emergency Management. About 50 American women participated, and our host



2016 Grassroots Academy in Tohoku, Rikuzentakata, Iwate



2018 Grassroots Academy in LA, at DR. LUCY JONES CENTER

Donna Boston, was then head of Orange County Emergency Management. There were also women from the Red Cross and various companies that have emergency management.

TSUNAMI LADIES MEET

The Japanese women had suffered something much worse than what we've had to deal with so far in California, and it gave our partners in Emergency Management a broader view of what it will be like dealing with a big disaster like this.

I also introduced Megumi to Emiliano Rodríguez Nuesch, an Argentinian filmmaker He wanted to do a project about tsunamis because he was doing a lot of work in Chile where they had a big tsunami in 2010. He created the movie, *Tsunami Ladies*, as a result, and I feel like a sort of godmother to that project. I wasn't directly involved, but I got them connected.



Research trip to Tohoku 2017, visiting Tamiko Abe who appeared in "TSUNAMI LADIES" at Minamisanriku Miyagi

I also went back to Japan in 2017 to give a keynote speech at a joint meeting of the American Geophysical Union and the Japanese Geological Union. I met up with Megumi again and traveled to Tohoku to research for my book, *The Big Ones*. The last chapter is all about *Women's Eye*.

– What do you see as commonalities of women's issues around the world?

I think my own perception of this has evolved a lot over time. I would also connect it to my evolving understanding of civil rights issues in the US in that it gets into direct discrimination versus systemic problems.

When you look at women's empowerment issues, I see it as two big pieces: a mental aspect and a physical one.

Our physical vulnerability is addressed in very different ways in different cultures. How does the community protect women? It's social norms, punishments, and a whole range of things. That's a place where you see bigger cultural differences. For example, when there isn't a cultural framework that says women are really safe, you want to believe it was the woman's fault she got raped so you can protect yourself by not making her mistake and are tempted to blame the victim.

Then there's the mental side, the microaggressions, the things that you don't quite pick up, that become a background you don't notice. When I was asked a decade ago what difficulties I faced, I thought I didn't really face anything. However, when I did the SAFRR Project,

where we valued collaboration over individual accolades, I later realized there was a norm of male aggression and competition versus female collaboration.

FEMINIZING SCIENCE

Both are necessary to some extent, especially in science. The fundamental of science is that we believe the easiest person to fool is yourself. You must find out if something is actually true, which means other people review your work and give feedback. As the reviewing process evolved within a masculine framework, the feedback was often aggressive or nasty.

The work I was doing was collaborative and focused on users. It wasn't about getting myself into the National Academy of Sciences but about getting the science to help people. It was only later that I saw that I was feminizing the science. I took it away from the idea of what I could get out of it as an individual and focused on getting the information out to help people.

I didn't get put up for the last level of promotion at my then job, but outside, I got a whole bunch of awards. The problem isn't whether a woman or a man does it. It's systemic. It's how you accommodate the system you go into.

We've made a bunch of steps and I think the next one is about the systemic viewpoint. Until your eyes open to it, you can't see it.

– How does that relate to what you see as common characteristics of women's empowerment work?

This is a shift that's going to take time. It's going to take having women in the system, and not just women like I was thirty years ago, just doing my work. There must be awareness, and the effort has to be collaborative. The problem is that when our framework is competitive and aggressive, change is often attempted through attack and that isn't going to work.

One of the things that so impressed me about Women's Eye was that the disaster was big enough to disrupt their framework. A really big disaster blows the framework you have been working in apart. What I saw in Tohoku were women who would normally not have thought of themselves as leaders, stepping up because they had to, because their families needed them.

It's easy to look at a disaster and say it's all bad, but in fact, Tohoku is probably going to be a much better place because women are trying things they didn't before at a time when men needed to let them.

When women try to lead grassroots movements to empower other women, they are often met with criticism.

– What are some common criticisms you have encountered? Where do they come from?

I really do see the aggression that's inherent in our cultural frameworks as a chunk of the problem. Even when you look at the questions: what are the common criticisms you've heard? How are people attacked? I don't think you will get out of this cycle when you focus on that, which is hard to say because does that mean

we are just supposed to accept this situation? However, there's a difference between accepting, fighting or finding your way around it. When we find our way around the problem and create an alternative that isn't connected to the aggression, it's good for both men and women.

COLLABORATION BRINGS CHANGE

We are still in a structure where there's always somebody we must fight or protect ourselves against. It's hard to move to that more collaborative feeling. Sometimes when you talk about these things, people will say, "Women can be really horrible, too." That goes back to the culture of aggressive competition, that I must put you down to put myself up, and that has a bigger negative impact on women.

It also touches on what it means to lead grassroots activities. When women talk about women's issues, I



2018 Grassroots Academy in LA, a small group's gathering was held at Dr. Jones's house.

think much of the criticism comes from feeling attacked. I think when you explicitly say, "I want to empower women," that feels to someone whom you're trying to change like an attack. I think a lot of it is being driven by defensiveness.

– What answers would you suggest for these challenges and criticisms?

My response to this is really about collaboration and how to get out of the aggression, attacking and defensiveness. We aren't trying to say this individual is bad. We are saying this is the system that has led us to this place and it's not a great place for a lot of people.

One of the things I have found the most helpful is asking someone why they think that way. It removes the idea that somebody else needs to be wrong for me to be right. That means somebody's always going to lose. You can't let them put you in that trap. If you're attacking them, it's the only place they can go.

That goes back to the framework -- the unseen air -- within which you move. It's hard to change, and I don't think it can be changed by attacking. It must be changed by collaboratively finding new approaches and making that normal. I will say that's a place where the pandemic has helped. There's plenty of guys sitting in Zoom meetings while their kids try to climb on top of their head. We're all dealing with it now, and I think that's good.

Interviewed by Joan Bailey (Unfiltered), 17.Feb.2022

Chapter 1

It began with the Great East Japan Earthquake

Our perspectives as individual citizens on what we saw in the disaster regions

- 15 The origin of WE's support for women during the emergency period
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The origin of WE's support for women during the emergency period

How gender issues appear during disasters

The founding members of Women's Eye met while volunteering after the Great East Japan Earthquake. We participated in a citizen's initiative called the RQ Citizens Disaster Relief Center (hereafter, RQ). It had its headquarters in the gymnasium of an unused elementary school called Masubuchi in Tome City, West of Minamisanriku. At first, we were busy with things like managing aid at the headquarters, running the volunteer center, or ferrying around volunteers from Tokyo. But when the Women's support team kicked into gear in May 2015, we began to meet as a group. Our

impetus for forming this team were the actions we had begun to look after women in Tome City.

In April 2011, Professor Fumie Asano from Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, the nonprofit Equal-net Sendai's executive director, Emiko Munakata, and Tome City's Gender Equality Ordinance Committee member Akemi Sudo visited to interview women in Tome City's seven evacuation centers. They pointed out the necessity for evacuation centers to adopt a gender-sensitive perspective.

This visit stimulated like-minded women from Tome City's Gender Equality



Providing massages while distributing aid in May 2011



A comforting talk in the Tome City evacuation center

Ordinance Committee to set up the “Miyagi Tome City Egao-net” (hereafter, Egao-net), a group supporting women in the evacuation centers. Several of us RQ volunteers provided back-office support to them, marking the start of our support activities for women in the evacuation centers.

When I was first asked to help provide support for women, I thought “why women only?” As Egao-net, we commuted back and forth to evacuation centers with Tome City workers. And the more I heard women’s stories, the more I came to recognize the need for targeted support. At the time, two months of evacuation center-life had gone by. We heard stories of women who couldn’t find underwear that fit them, even when center stages were piled high with relief goods. Stories of cracked skin due to constantly cleaning one’s hands at the entrance for the sake of others. Stories of people who felt they couldn’t speak about how dry their faces and bodies were due to lack of basic skin care, who got dressed under blankets because there was nowhere else to change. We heard how even though officials had brought partitions to evacuation centers without private spaces, those centers’ leaders had said they didn’t need them, and the women who did felt like they couldn’t speak up. From local male aid workers, we also

learned about evacuation centers where men opened boxes containing sanitary napkins and distributed one sanitary napkin to each person.

To try and support women according to their individual needs, Egao-net distributed personal request forms to 430 of them in the seven evacuation centers in Tome City. We then handed out items like sanitary products, underwear, skin lotion, and sewing boxes as far as possible in line with what the women had requested. When they received aid that fitted their bodies or needs, many reacted with a mixture of happiness and surprise. Although they’d been asked many times to fill in many surveys about what they needed, for more than a few women, this was the first time they had actually received those necessities.

We also held things like hair cutting or hand and skin massage events to relieve the stress of extended evacuation center life. When we did, other RQ volunteers asked us things like, why are hand massages necessary? The answer was: you’ll know when you see the smiling faces of the women receiving them. In the spaces where we massaged them, women felt a small release from the stiffness and extreme stress caused by life in the centers and began to chat with us. Massage became an occasion to open up about their worries and fears, far better than

ordinary interviews.

Establishing the RQ Women’s Support Center

At the end of May 2011, the joint head of RQ, Toshimichi Hirose, asked us to create a women’s support organization. After the Hanshin Earthquake, Hirose had directly experienced the need to support women through his work in various disaster sites. They were the ones caring for others vulnerable to disaster, such as children, the disabled, and the elderly, and he emphasized the need to support them accordingly. Of course, women are themselves vulnerable in some cases, and thus targeted for protection. But they have the power to grasp the needs of and care for other vulnerable subjects. “Women’s perspectives” are sensitive to the problems of daily life and the socially vulnerable. But the reality on the ground in the evacuation centers was one where women found it difficult to openly convey their needs and have those needs addressed, found it difficult to make contributions. This realization formed the foundation of our ideas regarding women’s issues there.

On June 1st of the same year, we opened the precursor to Women’s Eye, the RQ Women’s Support Center (RQW). Its vision was for “women to realize their

potential and be active in the regions’ reconstruction.” The mission was “to ensure that during the reconstruction process, the socially vulnerable, including women, are not left behind, and further, to provide sustainable support to women in tandem with local administrations and citizen’s groups, so that they find themselves in a safe space.”

What is the role of people from outside like us? In places where the situation is constantly changing, what support do people need the most? Will that support really help victimized women? What is the best way of bringing forth those women’s inner capabilities? While questioning ourselves like this, again and again, as RQ we took our first steps towards supporting women.

(text=Megumi Ishimoto)

Thematic community-building within people's life-worlds

It began with a craft project

In the summer of 2011, people began moving gradually into longer-term temporary housing. Many were assigned their units by lottery, breaking the familiar bonds they had with people from their areas. We often heard people say, “everyone is dispersed.” In the temporary housing, we also began to hear people saying, “we don’t know who is living around us,” “people tired of life in the evacuation centers are locking themselves up in their rooms,” “we’re worried about lack of connection to the world outside the temporary housing, because we can’t drive.”

Furthermore, many elderly women left in the evacuation centers began sharing their desire not to waste time, to do

something useful. Around that time, I met a woman who, out of sheer despair, couldn’t even get out of bed in the evacuation center. But when some craft materials were dropped off, it was like a switch flipped inside her. She enjoyed giving the volunteers gifts that she had made herself from those materials.

Because of this, we thought that handicrafts might give purpose to people living in the evacuation centers. So, in September 2011, we began handicraft courses. We handed out starter kits containing acrylic yarn, crochet hooks, large sewing needles, and scissors, beginning with eco-tawashi knitting. In the winter, our course on woolen accessories was well-received. We held these courses in venues like community space Hashikami Koryu Hiroba, opened by the Kesenuma City nonprofit Project K; the meeting room in Kesenuma City’s Hashikami temporary housing; the meeting room in Minamisanriku Town’s Nakasemachi temporary housing; and the meeting room in Tome City’s Minamikata temporary housing. Our interview transcripts from the time show how handicrafts relaxed people and they enjoyed making things together.

Some groups even wanted to make craftwork a job and began producing eco-tawashi for sale. Many volunteers sold these at events nationwide. Those events were occasions literally knitting together or connecting people with stories from the disaster regions ^(*).

Making places where people connect through common interests

Word spread that in our handicraft courses, “it’s relaxing, and because you’ve got something to do, you don’t have to force yourself to talk.” “It’s fun to make something useful,” people said. We were increasingly asked by associations formed in the temporary housing to “hold events providing people an opportunity to come together and get to know each other.” Together with volunteer teachers who wanted to lend support, we held lots of fun courses alongside the knitting ones in things like other handicrafts, exercise, cooking, breadmaking, and art. Thanks to the people that kept helping us, and the cooperation of local associations and social welfare councils, etc., between September 2011 and December 2014, we held 380 events with more than 3800 participants.

As we continued our activities in temporary housing and community spaces, however, we became aware of

psychological divides emerging between people. Although support was pouring in from all over the country, residents suffered from how lines were being drawn between who was and was not a “victim.” Tensions arose between people with different degrees of suffering or circumstances, differences in support, etc. It often became difficult for people to talk with each other. Towns and villages where people had lived near friends and relatives dispersing, and people moving to areas with little mingling, also led to problems like isolation.

On the other hand, we saw how when you make places where participants can pursue common interests like shared hobbies, interests, issues, etc., it became easier for people to reconnect. By spending and sharing relaxing, fun times together, people opened their hearts, gradually began to feel closer to each other.

How nurturing thematic communities became WE's strength

Around 2013, we moved our activities from the meeting rooms of temporary housing complexes to places like community centers that anybody could enter. We called what we were doing the “Developing Thematic Communities within People’s Life-worlds Project” ^(*). We aimed to make lots of small women’s

Temporary housing was built for three years, but some stayed more than seven





A knitting lesson held with Life Support Project K in Hashikami's community space



The class on baking bread in a frying pan was popular with parents, children, and seniors

Volunteers in Tokyo sell eco tawashi in a pop-up store for Kesennuma goods in Ginza

networks through courses and salons where they could gather around a common interest. In doing so, we hoped to create a safety net for people whose life-worlds had changed dramatically after the disaster. We believed that during the transition to recovery, it was important to build connections between people as they waited for their new homes to be ready.

Primary industry dominates the Sanriku Coast's farming and fishing villages, and their patriarchal, hierarchical local culture has deep roots. Local and blood relations connect people. However, with the post-disaster evacuation and the new psychological divisions, many connections broke down. Our thematic communities tackled social divisions by

creating new horizontal relationships between people, which became social capital providing them with opportunities for mutual assistance.

As people settled into life in temporary housing, we met many local women who said "I want to help my area." The motors of our thematic communities were those kinds of women. We worked hard to create fun, exciting, and relaxing places where people could gather around a theme so that participants themselves would value getting together, increase their involvement, and keep groups going themselves. "Nurturing thematic communities" became an important method shaping WE's activities after this period.

(Text=Miki Shiimoto)

(*1) The project has continued after as a community business called Andamondara, run by Kontena Oami.
(*2) This project was selected as one of 12 "good practices" worldwide and published in Women's leadership in risk-resilient development: good practices and lessons learned on the occasion of the 2015 World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai.

column

The key to local action is when things "come from within"

Learning from our meeting with Nukumori Kobo

We learned about the Minamisanriku Life Research Group in the spring of 2012. The group is a local women's association and descendant of postwar life improvement projects in farming and fishing villages. The members were talking about using government subsidies to realize a long-held dream of setting up a food processing workshop. They had a strong desire to preserve and share local food culture, like the exquisite miso which farming women handmade from rice malt, konnyaku, pickles, manju, and other small dishes. This desire only increased after the tsunami wreaked havoc on their town.

However, the members and municipal employees helping them faced difficulties deciding on a path forward, given the differing opinions held by members, including the chair. They asked us if we could provide an instructor to give them advice, so we connected them with a Tokyo-based consulting firm looking to volunteer.

After many talks, a plan was worked out covering things like the scale and utilities of the

workshop. However, more funds were needed than anticipated and there were no good prospects for usage and income. The consultants reached the conclusion that "it's best to give up the idea."

Everyone was shocked. But neither the burning desire nor voices in people's hearts saying "we want to do this" disappeared. Then, staff from Miyagi Prefecture's Agricultural Extension Center said, "if you're not going to do it, give up now, but if you are, we will do everything in our power to support you." This inspired members, and in the spring of 2013, Nukumori Kobo was born. The group still makes delicious miso and side dishes at the workshop using local ingredients, making the town richer and more fun.

The meeting with Nukumori Kobo taught us how activities which arise from within can breathe new life into a region. What methods can help sustain such activities, suspended between business and vocation? We are still searching for answers.

(Text=Miki Shiimoto)



Starting by making minutes of discussions



Handmaking miso with local malt



Members sold products and held talks at WE's events too

Chapter 2

How women's perspectives rejuvenate their towns

Our empowerment activities in Minamisanriku

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Towards a town where multiple generations raise children together
- 23 column the challenges of intergenerational exchange
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- 25 The Small Vocation Workshop with WE and new ways of working
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About the "Umi-sato Living Lab"

From supporting recovery to empowering women

How women's perspectives rejuvenate their towns

We set up the non-profit Women's Eye in May 2013, after realizing the importance of women's perspectives in the evacuation centers. From the beginning, we focused our activities on bringing out women's capabilities. This demonstrated our determination to create a "resilient society where women's perspectives count" in the disaster regions and contribute to social transformation, however small.

We put "empowering women" at the heart of our projects. In a post-disaster context where Minamisanriku's population was falling, we argued that women who wanted to make the town better should be able to, launching an empowerment drive with the slogan "let's rejuvenate our hometown through women's perspectives!" Our goal was to support women developing their own local activities and small businesses, giving them the strength to keep going.

We held a workshop on such ideas in

Minamisanriku in the winter of 2013. Many women came who had participated in or cooperated with our earlier courses. So did livelihood support staff from the Disaster Victim Relief Center. During the fun program that we provided, everyone spoke up. They talked about the need for social spaces, strategies to help the elderly go out, manufacturing handmade products using local ingredients, events with childcare services accessible for mothers, and more... Among the ideas discussed that day were many that would become real some years later. The situation in the disaster region was changing, with temporary shops opening and people's work restarting. Voices were increasingly heard saying that an excess of aid had hurt people's pride and damaged their independence. Within that context, we worked to connect women with each other in Minamisanriku, a town that had lost so many places and opportunities for people to socialize. We also continued our information exchange and interviews with people and organizations that had started group activities.



The Minamisanriku Handicraft Marché provided a colorful, fun space



People making crafts loved the color coordination workshop



The Minamisanriku Handicraft Marché provided a colorful, fun space

Skill development courses and project support

At the time, WE's offices were located within the Tome Women's Support Center, right next to Tome City's Minamikata temporary housing complex. In a café next to the office, we began holding courses for people who had started or wanted to start something. These covered topics like copy printing, web design, photography, computing, flyer-making, etc., falling under the category of "small business skill development." At the same time, we invited a small and medium-sized business management consultant on WE's board to be an advisor. They provided advice to workshop and course participants on setting up and maintaining businesses, applying for

funding, and business plans.

One of our foci in this period was empowering people consigning things to the craft goods store run by the Minamisanriku Tourism Association. In post-disaster Minamisanriku, many people began selling handicrafts through supporters. We also helped handicrafts groups we knew to find ways of procuring materials, held advice sessions on improving the quality of their products, and suchlike. Although those kinds of handicrafts flew off the shelves at recovery events in the early days, sales gradually began slowing down. As people who bought products as "aid" gradually disappeared, we entered a period where craft makers had to make choices individually about what to do next.

After consulting with the Tourism Association, we held courses for those makers on things like point-of-purchase advertising, color coordinating, store displays, etc. We also held social events where consigners could teach each other handicrafts, as well as study visits to nearby markets. By coming face-to-face with each other like way, horizontal connections emerged among consigners, and an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and desire to boost their sales grew.

In February 2015, we organized the Minamisanriku Handicrafts Market. Many consigners set up stalls personally, and so many customers came that they couldn't all fit into the venue. Within this space, which the consigners had decorated together, there was a children's area and a café, and bread and sweets were lined up on the tables. One could see everywhere the smiling faces of women searching for cute or tasty things and the voices of people happily greeting each other.

Leader? Or maybe, coordinator?

We talked often with local women who came to our courses and advisory meetings, and in doing so, learned how many felt like they wanted to do something. However, they were scared of standing

out, or felt like it would be hard to explain things to their families. Their inexperience also produced a lack of confidence which impeded them from putting their talents to work.

For these reasons, we prioritized cultivating connections between people through thematic community-building, even during skill development courses. There are many things that are scary to do alone, but when you feel part of a group or community, your fear of standing out decreases. We focused on creating atmospheres where women could easily participate (safe atmospheres, where they wouldn't feel spied on or coerced, and where they could leave without guilt regarding their situation). Places where people could connect horizontally without forming hierarchies, bringing in diverse local people.

Another thing I realized is that more women find it comfortable being coordinators who look after other people's needs than leaders. So, alongside having people taking part in various activities with us when we asked them to, we keep making opportunities at markets and other events where they could take center stage, supporting them in gaining experience of creating change themselves.

(Text = Miki Shiimoto)



**Tamiko
Abe**

Lives in Togura, Minamisanriku Town. After the disaster, set up her own seafood mail order company to create employment opportunities locally.

After marrying into a fishing household, I spent day after day helping with household chores and raising my children. I did so passively, following the instructions of men, starting with my husband. When I finally tried to start my own business after the tsunami, I felt like I was being crushed by the weight of prejudice found in rural areas like this. There was nobody that I could share my struggles with, so it was a really hard time. But around that time, Women's Eye reached out to me. I soon had people that I could ask for advice nearby, and because they were also women, we could speak freely with each other and find solutions for my issues. This was really reassuring and gave me strength. Meeting many kinds of people in the study events also broadened my horizons.

When local women become lively and more active, we each feel our own sort of happiness. And this makes for brighter, happier households and areas. Our lifestyles also diversify, our children have bigger dreams, and the gap between cities and regions becomes smaller, I think. In rural areas, we need to make the environment one where women can be active. The presence of Women's Eye really helps with this, because women like me feel an intimate connection with them.

Participants' voices

Women's Eye treats ordinary grannies like me as individual women. Since the disaster, they've encouraged not only young women but also middle-aged women in my hometown. And they've made time for the older ones among us to also consider acting. In a small town like this, it takes courage to start something. The staff at Women's Eye brought a breath of fresh air here and I'm now riding that current.

When I asked if the needlework that I'd practiced so long might help, WE helped me to start a needlework group. We're a chatty lot, and so long as you come with a needle and thread, you can make something. We've been going since 2013. I never thought we would continue for so long. The happiness of teaching what little you know to friends and seeing that knowledge put into practice, from their smiles and the gratitude you receive, is totally different from the happiness you get by making things yourself. In rooms warmed by the winter sun, we've experienced many precious moments. It's thanks to everyone at Women's Eye sticking by me that we could do so, and I'm grateful.



**Emiko
Yamauchi**

From Utatsu, Minamisanriku Town, but now living in Iriya district. Returned to Minamisanriku after the disaster when her husband retired. Teaches needlework to local women through the group Lien no Kai.

The "Minamisanriku Women's Learning Group" and "Childrearing for All Festival"

Towards a town where multiple generations support raising children

Visiting Niigata in 2014,
10 years after the Chuetsu
earthquake

As we entered the third year after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the construction of recovery public housing reached fever pitch. The question of how to build new communities during the move from temporary to permanent housing became a big issue. At a time when it was hard to imagine the future, we thought that learning from the efforts of another area could give us a more definite image of the stages of reconstruction yet to come. We put out a call to come and learn with us to women in local women's associations, officials from fishing cooperative women's groups, support workers from the Natural Disaster Victims Livelihood Support Center, and people participating in temporary housing governance. Our aim was to increase the soft power of women participating in rebuilding the town through learning from other areas.

By doing this, we started a study group to provide opportunities for learning



Listening to the stories of powerful women in Chuetsu

about the reconstruction process from a previous disaster region ^(*).

Ten women aged forty to seventy attended the first preparatory meeting for our visit in June 2014. Some of them knew each other's faces from local events and suchlike before the disaster. But those activities had stopped, and this meeting was the first time many had seen each other since. They talked about everything from their experience of the tsunami to how they were recovering. And some shared the opinion that "it's only three years since the disaster. We're not yet in a position to think about the future" and "Minamisanriku, which suffered such enormous damage, is not like Chuetsu, which has gone back to how it was." They did not yet feel at the stage where they could talk about the future.

(*) The Chuetsu visit was supported by a 2013 grant from the Toyota Foundation.

On the other hand, we saw the uncertainty and frustration that accompanied living in a town changing so quickly after the tsunami.

The participants tended to link cause and effect too quickly, saying “they can do this because X” or “in Y there is Z, so they can do it.” To create an attitude more conducive to learning what kinds of things people in Chuetsu had tried, and how we might apply them to our own efforts, we decided to prioritize “looking, listening, and talking together, as well as bringing back something useful for yourself and others.”

And then, in July 2014, we carried out the visit. We went to the former Yamakoshi village and Nagaoka city, now entering their tenth year after the Chuetsu earthquake. Among other sites, we visited a farmer's restaurant set up by local women; people working as “local reconstruction supporters,” who have continued to look after victims; and a nonprofit managing an

intergenerational meeting space focused on childrearing.

We realized that the activities of these women were practical and grounded in their daily lives. This made them easy to understand and continue without excessive effort. After the visit, we provided space for the participants to talk about it, sharing their opinions while reflecting on the trip. At first, the core members of these meetings were women who participated in the Chuetsu visit. But due to presentations we gave afterward around the town, the circle widened to include women of multiple generations who held an interest in reconstructing Minamisanriku and the issues facing it. Through this, the Minamisanriku Women's Learning Group was born.

Through visiting an area with even severer depopulation than Minamisanriku, the members learned how even if you reconstruct, so long as the people keep disappearing the area won't endure. It is the people living there that make a region appealing. And so, the participants began voicing the opinion that now was the time to make their own town, Minamisanriku, easier to live in for younger, childrearing generations. They shared how they wanted to make Minamisanriku a “town where intergenerational support makes it easy

to raise children.”

The ideas behind the Childrearing for All Festival

After hearing how women wanted “a town where intergenerational support makes it easy to raise children,” Women's Eye began holding interviews here and there to learn from women currently doing so. And through this, we met the members of the Let's Do It! Committee. They were concerned about issues like the environment for children, over-dependence on aid within the disaster region, and suchlike. Instead of “having something done” for them, they held events like exercise classes and flea markets, focused on doing what they could alongside their children.

It was our first attempt at running something like this, and we were very nervous about whether people would come. But 489 people did. Mothers with their babies, grandparents with their grandchildren. We even saw fathers. It was such a great success that the staff of the Minamisanriku Tourism Association, who provided the venue, were moved, saying that “we've not seen so many children happily running around since the disaster.”

We've held the festival five times so far, welcoming local women who sell

specialties like handmade goods, bread and sweets and suchlike, or run handicraft workshops using fabric and paper. The number of people who became event helpers after coming for fun has gone up, and junior leaders from high school have also become participants. The number of people involved has increased, and in a place where everyone is looking out for them, children themselves can have fun and do what they want. While they run around, their mothers can take a little break, which is why we also provide a relaxing area with massages, etc.

Furthermore, because the women who plan and run these events are themselves childrearing, to prevent them from overworking and becoming exhausted, we did things like setting the schedule so that they would still arrive on time even if they only left after dressing their children in the morning, or preparing earlier, so that each could hand out flyers on their own time, helping them as they helped us.

I only realized this later, but women from Rikuzentakata and Kesenuma who participated in the events went home wanting to hold their own, in their hometowns, with child-rearing as a theme, and actually went on to run mother-focused festivals here and there.

(Text = Michiko Kuribayashi)

resenting about the Chuetsu visit.
Nonprofit Ninaniina's Director, Satake, at the center



(*2) The Let's Do It! Committee was formed by childrearing mothers from Minamisanriku's Utatsu district in July 2014.

The challenges of intergenerational exchange

A Minamisanriku Women's Learning Group workshop



Tea-time with homemade pickles and sweets

Experiencing traditional local sweets like 'kahō dango' through intergenerational exchange



Efforts to promote intergenerational exchange and co-existence are considered one of the most important measures for building local communities in a society whose population is shrinking ^(*). In July 2014, after our visit to Chuetsu with the Minamisanriku Women's Learning Group, we decided to try and put into place our own intergenerational exchange and co-existence efforts, taking as an example the Intergenerational Exchange Center Ninaniina ^(**) where we attended a talk during the site visit.

First, we held interviews with young women raising preschoolers. We found that for those living in two or three generation households, intergenerational exchanges were daily occurrences. Those people also knew about local women's groups, including young wives' associations (called Kannon-ko) and older women's one, like Nenbutsu-ko, as well as food-related events at festivals, funerals, and suchlike. And furthermore, we learned that for married women, the first and biggest hurdle when they tried to start something new were the relationship between wife and mother-in-law and the wife's status within the household...In other words, if you simply set up exchange opportunities, you could actually prompt uncomfortable feelings among the women participating. Most are looking for relationships that are light-hearted and where they don't need to tread carefully as within their families.

Because intergenerational exchange efforts involve multiple generations and subjects, it's important that complementary relations

emerge, and necessary to take into consideration the different motivations of each group. WE's role was to search for points of connection through listening directly to participants and understanding the views of women from different generations. That point of connection was the desire to "make a town where it's easy to raise children." It was something that during their activities, the participants all shared and believed important.

To make things run smoothly, we needed to strategize, creating in advance rules such as 1) don't invite only multiple generations from the same area, but encourage multi-area exchanges, and 2) during talks, ensure that hierarchical relations between participants don't emerge. By doing things like this, both sides could feel comfortable together, and a place where multiple generations can work together emerge.

(Text = Michiko Kuribayashi)

(*) Town planning for intergenerational exchange and cohabitation in a declining population (23/05/2016).

(**) The Intergenerational Exchange Center Ninaniina was set up thanks to exchanges between elderly victims evacuated to a temporary housing area and local childrearing generations. It runs events like cookery courses for traditional foods facilitating relationships between those generations.

Valuing each person's "roots"

how to build resilience

What is afflicting women?

Women are busy. We felt this when seeing how women live in Minamisanriku, where Women's Eye (WE) has its base. Family life, child-rearing, jobs. How much time do they actually have for themselves? When every day is full, it's really hard to look inward and provide care for yourself. Even when they hear an SOS from their bodies, many people force themselves to keep going. But however hard they try, one day, their bodies cry out in distress, and they can no longer go on working like before.

In 2014, we held a gathering for 20–30-year-olds who had moved to Miyagi and its environs or had residences there, called the 'Second Hometown Café.' And there we met young women who, wanting to do something to help with reconstruction after the disaster, had returned to their hometowns or relocated. When they tried to be active in their workplaces or local communities, they found that whatever their intentions, they were labeled as "the wife of such-and-such household" or "so-and-so's daughter," etc., with ingrained local habits and customs constraining what they did and leaving them unable to act freely.

One time, we were strongly upbraided by a woman from Minamisanriku, who said that "you don't understand my feelings." After the disaster, she broke with convention and started her own business, and although she worked so hard, she lost her friends due to malicious rumors and gossip. It looked from outside like she was doing what she wanted to do. But in her heart, she was experiencing painful feelings that she couldn't express to anyone.

The changes we saw in participants

For one of these activities, we planned a "talk salon" inviting women active in the region as guest speakers. Rather than hearing about their projects or successes, we wanted to explore those



Yoga classes for body and mind



Casual events for breastfeeding women

guests' roots. For instance, through hearing about what sparked their interest, their struggles, their failures, what made them happy. Even so, the women in question were amazing, and could have been perceived by participants as quite different from them. However, we received many positive impressions from attendees touched by what the guests exposed of their roots.

"It made me see how little I'd been thinking about things," we heard, and "I realized how important it is to put your own concerns into words." We saw that by empathizing with the guests, and putting themselves in their shoes, the participants gained the bravery to try a little harder themselves.

Other than the salons, we also held things like courses on how to better your relations with people through communication (→the right side of this page) and encouraging healthier bodies and minds (such as yoga, foodways, and menopause-related classes). We started a consulting program on women's jobs at the same time, and another where specialist counsellors would listen to women talk about their issues.

In our work facilitating such classes and events, it was hard to know how the woman we met were living afterwards and if they had changed. But we learned recently that afterwards, many had changed gradually in ways that we didn't

anticipate.

We received a message from a woman that had long felt lost, searching for what she wanted to do. "I changed jobs and both the environment and my responsibilities improved," she said. "I feel like I was able to take this step because you kept paying attention to my feelings. Thanks to being listened to, I was able to take note of how I felt, and prioritize those feelings." We can accompany, support, and listen to people, but in the end, they are the ones who decide what to do. Whatever they suffer, we want them to remember to value themselves.

It's said that "when someone wants to change, they change from the inside outward." Until that person is ready to act themselves, we can only adopt a posture of waiting patiently.

(Text = Michiko Kuribayashi)



A talk salon. The topic is "her and my future"



A card from the women's work consultation office as an omamori (good luck charm)

column

on "communicating without stress"



Putting your feelings into words is the first step

The biggest cause of stress is human relationships. Have you ever felt like, "argh, even though I don't want to argue, it's come to this? I really want us to get on"?

I'm sure you've also felt like "if it was like this, my job would be easier, but they don't understand, so I don't even want to talk to them."

Communication plays a major role in creating relationships between people. Despite this, from birth to death we have no teacher apart from experience! Because communication is a skill, if you practice you get better. That's why WE also creates spaces to learn communication techniques.

The core of what we teach is NVC (nonviolent communication), an empathetic and cooperative method of communicating, and a breathing technique discovered by America's HeartMath Institute. I came across these methods while working as a study trip facilitator and was impressed by their utility. Since then, I have become a certified trainer of "connection practice," which integrates the two.

What you handle with these methods is, first, your own emotions. And the valuable but

personal energy that lies inside them. With communication, we tend to think of other people as our partners. But first, you have to deal carefully with your own self. Because if you don't, you won't have the capacity to give thought to others.

In WE's courses, we practice opening our hearts using breathing techniques that remove stress from our bodies, empathizing with ourselves, and then going on to empathize with others. If you're clear about what you desire, you can convey this to other people in an effective way that they are more likely to accept. Caring for yourself and caring for other people are connected.

The course title, "communicating without stress," was chosen by a young woman who previously worked in our Minamisanriku office. She said, "if it was up to me, I'd like to take this kind of course." Every time we hold it throughout the year, we feel filled with gratitude for her legacy.

From July 2020, we've challenged ourselves to hold the courses online. We hope that people can put what they learn into practice straight away, in their daily lives.

(Text = Sachiko Taura)



Asuka Sugawara

Lives in Minamisanriku Town. Hobbies are watching films and reading. Enjoys spending time with her four children.

I started a babysitting group with five people that I met at casual events. Each person would look after the other's children for three hours, giving the rest of us some free time. During that period, I was on maternity leave, and also in the process of changing job, so I used the free time to prepare for my new job and study. I could still have time for myself, for a break, although I was raising twins. Until we started this group, I didn't have any other friends who were mothers. Even if I went to nursery events, I was completely occupied by my own children...The good thing about five people is that you call each other by your names, not "such-and-such's mum." You can think of them as your friends.

Participants' voices



Nao Abe

Lives in Minamisanriku. Hobby is cooking. Recently started trying her hand at mountain climbing.

Through taking the communication course, I realized that I wanted to value my own feelings and thoughts more. Before then, even if I found something interesting, I tended to assume that other people wouldn't...I was also influenced by the people I met on the course and became able to introduce things I like to other people, to invite other people to things, etc. Recently, I'm often told by people around me that "you've become livelier, haven't you," and I definitely think I'm no longer burning out.



Chiharu Kondo

From Tome City, living in Shiogama City. Works as an administrative scrivener. Hobby is making clothes.

I participated in the Small Vocation Workshop (→ p25). We talked about learning from everyday troubles, creating a business from things you love and are good at, and being an entrepreneur, even if only on weekends. I learned that I could experience the excitement and hardships of earning money through own ideas and strengths, which is completely different than earning a salary. My consciousness of work and networking changed. By only doing what I was told to, I forgot the feeling of satisfaction you get from giving birth to something yourself. But WE and my friends from the Small Vocation Workshop guided me to a place where "I'll try, even without guarantees." It was like a small revolution inside me.

The Small Vocation Workshop with WE and new ways of working

What causes people's fear and anxiety?

Since beginning our empowerment activities, we kept banging up against the same wall. The local women who participated in Women's Eye's skill development courses and consultation meetings were extremely dedicated to "starting something." But on the other hand, they often made negative comments like "can I do this?," "I'm not qualified to do that, am I?," or "what will people think of me? My family especially don't understand..."

Skills and capacities linked to entrepreneurship are important. However, even with them people were paralyzed when confronted by fear or anxiety...We began to recognize that to overcome this, it's important to keep nurturing for the idea that "I can do it myself!" in people by cultivating their roots.

At the same time, there are many efforts to support entrepreneurship in the disaster regions. In fact, there are lots of women who have started up companies

through those programs. However, there are many "ordinary" women who feel hurdles in the way of trying within that framework. They don't think that entrepreneur support programs have any relation to them. It's hard to tackle things like lack of confidence due to inexperience and hard to throw off a framework confining people. We saw particularly how mean words from people around them created pressure and thoughts like, "without xyz, I can't do this."

Also, the image of success as continual growth after starting up can cause indecision for dedicated women with future life events in the corner of their mind. They can't definitively promise such continual growth given those.

Furthermore, there is a situation particular to the disaster regions. The degree of harm experienced by each person, or degree of aid received from supporting organizations, and suchlike, lead to suspicion between residents. Rumors never stop. This regional characteristic made the hurdles seem even higher for people.

Erasing beliefs, questioning common sense

When we asked for advice about these worries during the Japan NPO Center's Johnson & Johnson Tohoku Disaster Region Community Empowerment Program, which we participated in in 2016, they connected us with Yamagata Prefecture's Tsuruoka Vocation Project (*).

The Vocation Project bases itself on the "30,000-yen-a-month business" philosophy of professor Yasuyuki Fujimura, who runs Atelier Non-electric in Tochigi Prefecture's Nasu Town. This approach emphasizes only doing good things that bring smiling local faces to mind. Even if people disparage those things, you don't worry and carry on. Because the philosophy emphasizes putting together lots of small jobs, it can match different life stages and one can follow it at one's own pace. When I heard this message, which called into question my previous beliefs about "entrepreneurship," I thought, "this is what we need!"

We asked the Vocation Project's president, Keiko Ito, to teach what she knew to people in Minamisanriku. In the 2017-2018 year, we held multiple Small Vocation Workshops with WE, targeted mainly at women in the 20-40 age range.

The first class with Ito apparently made "the scales fall" from participants' eyes. It turned out that the same women and youth-specific troubles that we had seen also afflicted people in Tsuruoka City. These are probably problems of regional culture, and people don't even think to question them, so even when someone is suffering, they can't see a way out.

What we realized when we started the vocation work is that if you open up a little, and build experience in receiving honest feedback from others, it creates bravery through a sort of chain reaction.

To get rid of one's fears and anxieties, you have to first analyze yourself, and recognize the way that you are. By drawing on the strengths of others as you do so, you and them become friends who trust each other. The realization that things you take for granted about yourself can be strengths that help others is pretty hard to find alone. That kind of refreshing surprise can give you the power to take another step forward.

Every year, at the end-of-year presentations and markets following the workshops, interesting ideas flew around. The people who slapped a name on one and started an independent business, the people who do multiple jobs, the people who've challenged themselves to try a job in a new area, the people who

are still working on something because it's not yet time to start: each took another step forward.

After some students said they wanted to meet Professor Fujimura, who coined the "30,000 yen-a-month business" philosophy, we held a study visit to his Atelier Non-electric, where we received great encouragement. Members of the vocation workshop participated in events like the Hikoro Marché,

introduced on p29, and Tagai Market, which WE and Minamisanriku's Social Welfare Council took around public housing in the town's higher ground relocation areas, aiming to create new presences stimulating those areas.

Although we have not held the Vocation Workshop since 2019, the lessons we drew from it were huge, and we continue to implement them in our activities.
(Text = Miki Shiimoto)

(*) Tsuruoka Nariwai Project <http://tsuruoka-nariwai.com/>



The first lecture by Keiko Ito for the Small Vocation Workshop with WE



2017 end-of-year mini presentations



2018 end-of-year Hina Marché

Visiting Atelier Non-electric in Tochigi Prefecture's Nasu Town



sitting around the table together

on traveling meal parties

Sitting around a warm dinner table together really helps people to connect with each other and nurture trusting relationships. Around the time that individual members of Women's Eye were recognizing the importance of eating together informally through personal experiences, we met Aiko Abe, a staff member at Sansankan Lodge in Minamisanriku's Iriya district, which provides "satoyama" experiences.

Aiko is a talented and keen student. In order to ensure that all visitors to the lodge can enjoy its food, she takes into account various allergies and can provide for religious or ethical diets such as veganism and Halal. But more than anything, she is devoted to studying food that is good for the body ..and a little bit unusual, food that makes you excited.

After we met Aiko, in January 2017 we moved our offices to a former primary school building annex behind Sansankan. We formed a tag-team with the lodge to open a food hall, which flourished. We called the site our "Food Lab," hosting events like exchange parties where people could listen to local producers tell their stories and eat delicious food made from local ingredients, as well as lunch talks. More recently, we opened a lunch restaurant there run by WE and Sansankan.

When the Small Vocation Workshop with WE finished in March 2019, we felt like we wanted to create something bringing together young women, like former participants, who were embarking on their own small challenges in the town and others nearby. We decided to hold a dinner party every two months called the WE Club. Through consulting with Aiko, who had also been a participant in the vocation workshop, we decided to make it a

"traveling meal party" where the participants would make and eat cuisines from various countries. Today, you can search for recipes from any country on the internet. We came up with the idea hoping that by tasting something unusual, with a little flavor of travel, we could lighten people's hearts and help the conversation to flow.

Each time we gathered, different participants would tell stories, and while eating delicious food and cleaning up together, intimate conversations flourished. I think we, the staff, enjoyed those events the most of all. As of today, we've "traveled" to Vietnam, the Middle East, Russia, Germany, Spain, Southern India, Thailand, Mexico, and Portugal. But with the spread of the new coronavirus infection, we unfortunately had to make the January 2020 meeting our last event. The lunch restaurant, which had just got off the ground, is also on hold.

We won't stop praying that the day will come when we can reopen our food hall and everyone can connect again.

(Text = Miki Shiimoto)



Pizza party



Middle-eastern cuisine event



Mexican food party

Bakery/patisserie oui

how places bring forth powers

Somewhere women can realize small dreams

In February 2017, Women's Eye (WE) opened bakery/patisserie oui in Minamisanriku's Iriya district. To start a food business, you need somewhere with a manufacturing license from the health authority. The initial investment to create such a workshop can form a bottleneck, making it difficult for people to practice on a smaller scale. For that reason, there are many young women who give up on the idea even when they'd like to try. Oui was born as a place where that kind of woman could practice making and selling bread, sweets, and suchlike. Oui is both a shared workshop that members can use and where we manufacture and sell "WE bread." What spurred us to create the facility was the breadmaking skills training that we began in May 2015. During this training, seven local women who had experience of breadmaking and "wanted to do something with bread" in the future learned skills from bakers born in the area.

When the allotted six months of



Instructor Takahashi from bakery shop "ficelle" in Ishinomaki

training was up, the seven graduates formed a group called Kokomugi and sold bread at small markets in the area. They sold the hundred loaves that they had made in a rented workshop in a neighboring city. The next day, they received an enquiry from a customer who bought one of their red bean paste rolls, who said "I've never eaten bean paste that good. How do you make it?" People appreciated their careful craftsmanship and focus on delivering safe, local produce.

One member, a woman in her thirties, told us how "after the disaster, I had almost given up hope that I could live joyfully in this town, but Kokomugi gave me so much excitement and so many new encounters." The feeling of

accomplishment from doing what she wanted, and presence of partners to compete nicely with, empowered her.

Making things your own way

Since we opened the bakery, 23 people have registered (as of April 2021), with each selling bread, sweets, manju etc. under their own store names. There are groups that sell at events several times a year, people who set up their own stores after using the bakery one or two times, and people who spent more than a year baking bread there, and now have their own bakeries, etc.

Even when funding and systems are in place to support women entrepreneurs, it's important to maintain a balance between what those women value and their lives, as they seek understanding and support from their families and juggle work with childrearing and caring for the elderly. Although everyone using our bakery experienced conflicts and worries at first, they've all dedicated themselves seriously to bread and sweet-making.

Furthermore, businesses are built from lots of small decisions you make yourself, and even on a small scale, successful management requires you look after your money well. Both people used to rely on others and people who always

compare themselves to others unfavorably have to move forward trusting in their own decisions, financial and otherwise.

For those users, at the bakery, we held skill development courses and joint sales events, and provided a space where they could connect and exchange information with each other. Having these kinds of colleagues really gave them a boost.

Those women, who became new entrepreneurs in a rural area, could give excitement to those around them through making things themselves: "you can eat handmade bread," "there's a beautiful space." At the same time, they became a presence that other people who wanted to try their hand could come to for advice.

One more function for the bakery

At the same time as sharing the space, in the bakery we produced WE's original bread, which we sold three times a week. WE's breadmaking was based on the creed of the Umi-sato Living Lab (->P29), which emphasizes three points: making use of the blessings of one's land, respecting the environment, and creating things good for body and soul.

Since first setting up the space, we've challenged ourselves to make bread incorporating produce from the area. As we enter our fourth year, selling a fixed amount of produce on a regular basis, the existence of our bakery has finally been recognized by local people. By procuring ingredients from producers whose faces we know, and starting to grow wheat in front of the bakery, we've become part of the land ourselves, and the number of people cooperating with us has gone up. We feel like we've been able to circulate value locally, which is the true meaning of an Umi-sato Living Lab.

The member of staff who joined right after we started the bakery quit when she became pregnant. At present, the employee who works as our breadmaking staff is in her third year. She worked for seven years at a bakery in Sendai, but quit when she got married, and

immediately after moving to Minamisanriku, the disaster struck. Since then, she has dedicated herself to raising children, but when her third child reached one year old, she heard from an acquaintance that the bakery/patisserie was looking for staff, and returned to work with the support of her family. For us, this was a once-in-a-lifetime connection.

By maintaining a place offering a flexible working environment, and accepting people's choices regarding life events like marriage, pregnancy, birth, and childrearing, we've helped young women to stay active. Oui provides opportunity for those women, who are normally "unseen" in rural areas, to be "seen," which in turn helps to make those regions livelier. This shows how meaningful it is to have a "place."

(Text = Kuribayashi Michiko)



Users selling bread at the Hikoro Marché in June 2017



Three times a week, 20 varieties of WE Bread for sale



Miyako Kurihara

Moved to Minamisanriku's Iriya district in 2006 with her husband. Manages the soba café Fuan. One day, while making bread and reading in her own unique way, heard about Women's Eye's breadmaking training, and participated while also providing the venue.

Kuribayashi from Women's Eye suggested holding a breadmaking course in my house. Afterwards, we began talking about how "it'd be great if we had a bakery. And it would be good if we could improve our breadmaking skills, and sell the bread." We decided that the location for the bakery would be on land my family owns, and the current location was completed four years ago.

They say that "if you keep wishing for it, your dream will come true," and after being moved by the perspective and activities of WE, who support women's independence, I became a member of a group of bakery users called Kokomugi, realizing my dream. I thought that if we're going to the effort of making bread with natural yeast, we should make our own wheat. And so, we started growing strong flour in a wheat field that my husband had been cultivating since before the disaster.

Around four years into working at WE's bakery, I'm reminded again how correct WE's approach is. Seeing the people who've gone independent after working at the bakery, and the WE Bread staff who keep working hard while battling to raise children. I think it's amazing to see the energy people put into doing what they love.

Participants' voices

I used the shared workshop at bakery/patisserie oui for about one year, in 2019...and in the autumn was able to open my own bakery in Kesennuma. oui is an incredibly important place that removes the barrier to entry for bread and sweet-making, which require a huge amount of funds to start. It allows you to take small steps at the beginning.

The feeling of confidence and satisfaction that I got when I took my first step, knowing that "small is OK, just try," became a source of strength for me after the tsunami, where I lost everything. At oui, by contrast, I lost count of how many precious opportunities they gave me, with how they put their hearts into supporting each person, lending you strength through constant encouragement.

Regarding reconstruction, each individual's pace is different, and there are still people who've not felt able to take their first steps. I pray that WE will continue to be a light in the dark for vulnerable women, empower them by lighting the way. I too am baking my bread today hoping that I can be a beacon of hope for someone.



Izumi Mizuno

Lives in Kesennuma City. Owner of Izumi Bread. After the disaster, got acquainted with breadmaking, and now aims to hand-make "bread for children" one loaf at a time, using Japanese wheat and no additives.

column

a project helping people to keep living here About the "Umisato Living Lab"

The staff of Women's Eye were captivated by the rich nature, people, and local culture that we encountered in Minamisanriku after the disaster. WE provided the administration for an art event called Walk Around Art Veranda on the grounds of a private house in Minamisanriku's Iriya district, which was held three times from 2013 onward. This event embodied the desire of many people in the town who had received aid to express and convey its appeal through art.

On the other hand, however, it was notable how many young people would say, "there's nothing in this town." No shopping mall, no entertainment, nowhere to go. Nothing to do but leave. But there are many people who, although they say such self-deprecating things, actually feel a deep connection to the land, blessed as it is to a surprising degree by forests, villages, rivers, the sea, and four seasons.

After the disaster, young people touched by the richness of the town's non-consumerist life even moved here after volunteering. To fulfill the desire of local women for a future where the "way of raising children here can continue," we must ensure that the blessings

inherited by this land continue to circulate and inspire people. To help build the more sustainable society that lies beyond reconstruction, WE have also acted, and our desire to work alongside townsfolk holding ecological and circular perspectives has strengthened.

We called the activities born through such collaborations and perspectives—where we learn from the blessings of nature and local ways of living with it, use things produced locally, take action, and build ways of continuing to live on this earth together, from the ground up—the "Umi-sato Living Lab."

Through the lab, we organize activities like the organic food-focused Hikoro Marché, whose circle of collaborators is growing year-on-year. we've made tables and chairs from Minamisanriku cedar, bamboo tents and climbing frames, etc. During all of WE's activities in Minamisanriku, from from publishing booklets of interviews with local grannies to making reading and writing desks, running study groups, and more, we keep in mind the philosophy animating the Lab.

(Text = Miki Shiimoto)



Interviews with local grannies in Bappa Note

Trying weight-based sales in the Marché



Climbing frames made from local bamboo by carpenters

Chapter 3

The Grassroots Academy Tohoku

A place where the roots of young women active in the region grow and intertwine

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The beginning: the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction pre-event, International Grassroots Women's Academy in Tohoku

What is a "grassroots academy"?

It all began when I met the Huairou Commission in New York. Huairou is an international NGO whose network of grassroots women activists spans more than fifty countries. In September 2014, when I was in Boston for a study trip, I wanted to meet the Commission no matter what, and after riding the train for three hours, map in hand, I arrived at their offices in Brooklyn, New York. Because I hadn't met them before, I asked several people who knew them to introduce me, and secured an appointment this way.

The following year, in 2015, the Commission would bring women leaders from around the world to the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, due to be held in Sendai. I told them directly that I wanted to invite these women to Minamisanriku and create a dialogue between local women who had experienced the tsunami and those

leaders, who had overcome their own catastrophes and conflicts all over the world. Although we were meeting for the first time, the people I spoke with—Sri H. Sofjan and Suranjana Gupta, from Malaysia and India respectively—shared my desire, and proposed another option. "Why don't we hold an academy in Minamisanriku?" "What is an academy," I asked them, somewhat taken aback and stiff with nerves.

They explained that Huairou's "grassroots academies" run alongside international gatherings like those of the UN or World Bank. The Commission gathers grassroots leaders, has them share



The academy began at the Huairou Commission's New York office

experiences and learn from each other, and sometimes submits recommendations to those international gatherings. They said that if we could arrange a venue, place to stay, mode of transport, and finance in Minamisanriku, we could run a grassroots academy as a pre-event of the World Conference on Disaster Risk reduction.

Holding the International Grassroots Women's Academy in Tohoku in Minamisanriku

The next five months after I returned to Japan in October were intense. Innumerable local people helped us, from the women who'd long supported us to the mayor and town hall staff, local hotels, and volunteer interpreters. In March 2015, we reached the point where we were ready to hold a two-day international training in Minamisanriku. 39 young women from Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima and 15 women leaders from ten countries had assembled.

For the training's Japanese name, we wanted to highlight how in Tohoku, women from the region were learning together with women from around the world. For this reason, we chose "International Grassroots Women's Academy in Tohoku" (hereafter, "Academy"). One of the academy's defining characteristics was that participants should not only

leave having learned something new. They should also come having considered what they could do to help the other participants.

At the opening of the training, attendees wrote what they could contribute on sticky notes and attached them to the wall. Along with the other women, the participants from Tohoku contributed by explaining how they had overcome crisis situations, what kinds of issues they had faced while being active in their areas, and what strategies they had come up with for facing those challenges.

During that process, for instance, we listened as a woman from India spoke forcefully about how before she had experienced a disaster several decades previously, she never left the house, and never spoke in front of people. But to live, and keep her area going, she needed to do something. That's why she



Alongside participants from ten countries and Tohoku's three disaster regions, many local women and others provided food, hospitality, and interpreting

pushed back against ideas about how women should behave in her region and household. She told us bashfully how she had got together with other women, forming a cooperative association, working together, helping each other, and through all of this, gaining the courage to take next steps. Before she knew it, she had become the leader of a group comprising tens of thousands of people.

Although the scale is different, we saw commonalities between her story and our founding and activities after the disaster. Many women listening also grew stronger in their conviction that they could take more risks.

Providing continuous training opportunities to women who lack them

We heard the following responses from women from Tohoku's three prefectures that had assembled for the pre-training before the international academy. "It's the first time I've attended a training," and "it's the first time that I've spoken with women active in other prefectures." Many group representatives invited to trainings are male, and it's hard to gain understanding from your family and those around you when a woman wants to leave home to participate in a training, we heard.



Group work in English and Japanese

When setting up the international academy, I also struggled with finding participants. I asked key informants to act as coordinators in the various prefectures, with prefectural offices and non-profits that had worked with us before, and local actors that we had connections with, also introducing us to potential participants. Although they were happy to introduce us, a major concern was that many women would find the hurdles to leaving home for several days high, with gaining permission from their places of work and their families alone likely to exhaust much of their strength. To try and reduce the hurdles even a little, we did things like setting up an official homepage that would increase trust, writing official letters of invitation to participants, and providing financial support to reduce the burden. The training itself was about more than gaining skills. It was about meeting partners that shared their concerns, and providing a place where people could increase their social resources. Chances to do this are slim, so we decided to continue holding trainings for women for at least three years.

(Text = Megumi Ishimoto)

For young women in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima: The Grassroots Academy Tohoku

What is the “Grassroots Academy Tohoku”?

One year after the international academy, we started the Grassroots Academy Tohoku program targeted at women in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima Prefectures. What could help women working to help others, and to help their regions, we asked? We searched for answers through three years of trial and error and eight total events.

From the experience of holding the international academy, we learned that even though participants all live within Tohoku and suffered during 3.11, there were few exchanges between prefectures. Simply getting to know people holding the same ambitions as them within their prefectures could have a big impact. Since we’d received so much support creating opportunities for people to gain knowledge and skills, we wanted to focus our efforts on strategies that we could implement ourselves for bringing people together.

The people who participated

The participants were people doing some kind of activity for the sake of other people, or society, in each region. Creating spaces for mothers, supporting children’s learning, supporting people with disabilities, neighborhood planning, agriculture, education, design, craft, etc. etc., the work done by women who participated touched on more fields than we have space to write about here, with each trying to put into practice their vision of how society should be. In the academies, they could put aside the normal roles forced on them by society and empathize with each other on an equal footing.

What we did each time

Almost every time, the program we offered was based on three pillars:

team-building, introducing each other’s activities, and learning from senpai (people who’ve gone before you). Our hope was that people would take part active part in these, taking away things that they’d realized themselves through doing so.

1. Team-building

This is a method where you tackle issues by cooperating as a team and learn what is necessary to produce results together. We split people into teams of roughly ten people and asked them to try and solve difficult problems. The point was not to find the correct answer, but to engage in trial and error and reach the goal together with many laughs along the way. During that process, we wanted people to realize things that could inform their own activities, but our

biggest goal was to thicken the connections between the participants who had gathered. Although many would likely participate only once, they could form new friendships with people that shared their feelings.

2. Introducing each other’s activities

On the surface, the goal here was to have participants introduce themselves and let the others learn about their activities. But it also provided an opportunity for them to practice skills. For instance, to practice explaining what they do and what they value comprehensibly in a short period of time. Each time, we would set up four or five presentation spots, and the participants would station themselves individually at each of them, repeating their presentations four or five times. In three



Excitement builds during team-on-team activities



People introducing their activities. Others could listen to whichever presentation they wanted



minutes, they had to introduce their activities, and for another three minutes, take questions and answers. Those who were not presenting could go around the stands and listen to the presentations in whichever order they liked. This method is called a “presentation circuit,” and allows for a concentrated form of iterative improvement. Those presenting could experiment in front of a small group of people without feeling nervous, and those listening learn about everyone else’s activities without getting bored.

3. learning from senpai (people who’ve gone before)

We switched the location of trainings between Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima each time. To help activate the areas we were visiting as much as possible, we also put time aside to hear talks by people that could act as senpai for the women gathered. The majority of the talks were by people tackling issues



The founder of a non-profit we visited in Los Angeles gives a talk in Japan

raised by the Great East Japan Earthquake. Of course, we invited men as well as women. Even when the kinds of activities being discussed differed from their own, participating women shared the same kinds of feelings towards those activities. These occasions were also not one-way lectures, but opportunities for receiving empathy, gaining confidence from hearing about admirable works, and being encouraged. Each occasion provided a kind of meaningful experience unachievable when you only mix with people the same age as you.

Where we strategized the most

The differences between these events and other trainings that we provided lay, perhaps, in the hardest-to-see places. Those were: where we held them, where people stayed, and what they ate. Through piling up these training camps, we learned that for people taking action to improve society, what’s more important than anything is maintaining their motivation and enthusiasm. And to maintain those things, “what” they learn is not only important. We learned that “where” they spend the time also has a huge influence.

Most woman have many expectations placed on them. Alongside their activities outside of the home, they are expected to keep house, care for children and the elderly, and more. The people

Renshoan in Fukushima Prefecture’s Tamura City. Participants were grateful simply to have such a beautiful venue, increasing their interest and satisfaction.



who participated in the grassroots academies almost never take time for themselves, and had to set aside a precious three days in otherwise busy schedules. That’s why we poured our hearts into making the environment as relaxing as possible, so people could make new human connections while resting their bodies and minds. We prepared to accommodate allergy-related food requests, and provided childcare so that women could bring their kids with them, doing our best to ensure a space where the thought of staying a while would set their hearts aflutter.

By providing our program in that kind of environment, and giving participants that kind of free time in doing so, we ensure that the women themselves could talk, listen, and recharge their batteries.

What were the results?

“A place where you can find out what

you want to do, and when you struggle to figure out how, meet friends who can lend you strength.”

This is how one woman evaluated the academy. Even when their areas or activities differed, everyone faced the same worries. At the academy, there were others who understood their struggles, friends who they could share experiences with without fear, and when they returned to their daily lives, they could make renewed progress towards achieving their goals. By learning from your friends, supporting each other, and replenishing your strength, you can grow. Most people participated multiple times, inviting their friends, and it became a place they felt at home. But our biggest accomplishment was the emergence of people who said, we want to make a place like this in our area, and started their own versions.

(Text = Sachiko Taura)

When a cycle of empowerment emerges

Programs born from the Grassroots Academy Tohoku

Alongside the Grassroots Academy, there are many programs we came up with. One of these is “community action.” In rural areas, there are women doing really amazing things on a small scale. For those women, the hurdles to apply for funding or putting together a budget are high, so they remain unable to fulfill their wish to expand. Community Action is a program lasting roughly a year that provides small grants of around 100,000 yen. Participants learn to write grant applications, prepare budgets, and write texts explaining their

activities to people, growing through direct experience. We accompany the participants throughout, mentoring and advising them via Zoom.

Originally, we targeted the program at participants in the Grassroots Academy Tohoku. For instance, we helped those running the mother-oriented Mama Festival in Rikuzentakata City and empowered mothers and nurses giving long-term care to sick children in Fukushima City, among others. For the 2020 program, former academy participants looked for and introduced us to women working on small but important activities in their own areas of activity,

widening our network. The women they introduced us to came from places like Kamaishi City, Ofunato City, Kesennuma City, Fukushima City, and more. And they told us that former academy participants were people respected locally, people doing amazing things.

Evaluating the original academy: birthing a new cycle

Several years after holding the international academy, I headed to New York to take part in the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women. I visited the office of the Huairou Commission, and the

staff there told me that they’d like to do an interview about our academies.

The commission’s grassroots academies bring together women leaders that are already active, but we poured our efforts into searching for the seeds of future activities, so we could nurture them. “Your academies search for women in the region with potential, nurture new human capital, build networks, and provide opportunities for learning. That’s amazing. You’re creating new cycles of empowerment,” the Commission praised us.

(Text = Megumi Ishimoto)



In 2017, three local women who participated in the academy held a mother’s festival in Rikuzentakata City with funding from the Community Action program



Mizuho Sugeno

From Fukushima Prefecture's Nihonmatsu City. Since 2010, runs an organic farm in her hometown. From 2020, also manages a roadside station in Fukushima's Namie Town, where as the person responsible for agricultural products, she promotes Namie's farming industry and regional revival.

Through the training, I got the chance to make presentations about my activities, practicing ways of speaking that can convey my message effectively to other people. I've become able to tell people about the goals and visions motivating my projects with more confidence.

Furthermore, I got to meet women from Tohoku and feel empowered, and the academy stimulated new activities creating connections between us. When, at times, I've felt like my heart will break from loneliness, the connections with people that I made there gave me emotional support.

The training abroad also made a huge impression on me. Through exposure to the leadership philosophies and ways of living of American women leaders, I felt the courage to change, and learned the skills to live more resiliently. I also learned how important it is to choose to live with your own happiness firmly at the center. The meetings I had with women in whose footsteps I want to follow have become a great resource for my life moving forward.



Yoshimi Tsushima

Lives in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture. As a member of the project department of the nonprofit Kids Door Tohoku, focuses her efforts on learning support for middle-schoolers, career education, and providing consultations for those providing care. Originally from Sukagawa City in Fukushima.

The first time I participated in an academy was in 2016. I was confused about how to behave, and felt overpowered by the other participants. But as I participated two times, three times, I become familiar with more people, and at some point, I naturally become able to show my real self. In particular, I feel like I built strong bonds with the members who took the one-week training in Seattle. During the training, our experiences and feelings really resonated with each other, and we cried together many times, laughed together, and could talk with each other about deep matters.

I've met many women working hard to achieve their goals and face their struggles, and their uprightness has impressed me, giving me inspiration for how to live my own life. When we spend time together, I feel peace of mind. The expression "sisters" really characterizes the relationships we've built. The lessons that I've learned from the academies and the presence of my sisters gives me confidence and energy. I'm full of gratitude for the members of WE, and for my sisters. I offer my heartfelt prayers that everyone stays happy and active.

Voices of participants in the Grassroots Academies

I realized that until now, when I'm in my mid-thirties, I've lived without understanding how I should deal with the fact that I'm a woman. I'm not good at acting feminine nor at talking about femininity. But I felt dissatisfaction and anger at the position of women... Giving voice to that meant crying out that I'm a woman, that my rights should be protected, but I felt like I couldn't even talk about these things.

However, through participating in the academy, I came to feel that I could recognize myself as a "woman" and give voice to my opinions as a "woman," and as an individual, without fear. I'm excited to see what I'm going to become moving forward. I want to thank the staff, the other participants, and the wonderful instructors from the bottom of my heart. Thank you so much for the unbelievably intense, rich time we spent.



Kiri Asano

From Fukushima City, Fukushima Prefecture. Runs the culture and art blog KiNoKuMaYa. As a research coordinator, links researchers with the region and tries to build bridges between different fields.

In 2016, I was working for a nonprofit supporting childrearing. When I participated in an academy at that time, two things made an impression on me.

The first was the sight of participants introducing their activities to each other. For me, who felt bashful about my own activities, the words of the facilitator, Sachiko, were startling. "Stop saying, 'it's only me, after all,'" she told me. The reason was that the words "after all" were denying my own possibilities. This led me to stop thinking that, "it's only me, after all."

The second thing that made an impression was the lesson about how important self-care is. By being happy and content yourself, you can pour that overflowing happiness into other people. The feeling of wanting to encourage others, of concern for others, is something that follows from being fulfilled oneself. Instead of negating myself, I've become able to think genuinely about whether I'm happy enough.

I think these kinds of academies are places where, like climbing a staircase one step at a time, you gradually realize how to face your own feelings.



Megumi Itabashi

From Iwate Prefecture's Rikuzentakata City. Director of the nonprofit Tonarino's planning division and the childrearing information website Nanairo Press. Occasional writer and photographer. Mother of two primary-schoolers.

Record of the academy

1. Pre-training

Theme	"What we learned from and want to convey about the Great East Japan Earthquake"
Date	16-17 Feb, 2015
Location	Akiu Onsen, Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture
Participants	35
Guest lectures	Akiko Domoto, President, Japan Women's Network for Disaster Risk Reduction: Challenge yourself to lead!; Jackie Steele, Associate Professor, University of Tokyo: Culture and diversity; Makoto Tajima, JANIC: Citizen's roles and the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction

2. International Grassroots Women's Academy in Tohoku

Theme	"Sharing the importance of, and experiences with, grassroots activism that resonates globally"
Date	March 10 & 12, 2015
Location	Minamisanriku Town ※ Held jointly with the NGO Huairou Commission
Participants	39, with 15 from ten countries abroad
Facilitators	Suranjana Gupta, Regina Pritchett, Sachiko Taura, Megumi Ishimoto
Guest lectures	March 9: visit to Tome City's Minamikata Temporary Housing, talk on "Minamisanriku Tsubaki Monogatari"; guided tour of disaster area (Disaster Prevention Center, etc.); talk by women who set up businesses after the disaster (Tamiko Abe); March 11: Bus tour (Togura Middle School, Tamiko no Umi Pakku Office); participated in Minamisanriku's memorial ceremony

3. Pre-training

Theme	"Learning from and connecting with each other"
Date	12-13 Feb, 2016
Location	Sumita Town & Rikuzentakata City, Iwate Prefecture
Participants	Participants: 16 plus 2 children
Guest lectures	Noriko Yokozawa, Sumita Town Council: Connecting councils and non-profits; Rina Sasaki, wiz: Creating youth communities; Atsuyo Sasaki, SUMICA: Child-friendly spaces for citizen exchanges; Makoto Tajima, JANIC: Disaster prevention around the world; Earthquake specialist Dr. Lucy Jones: overcoming difficulties as a pioneering woman scientist

4. In Fukushima

Theme	"How to involve people in the regions"
Date	5-7 August, 2016
Location	Tamura City, Fukushima Prefecture
Participants	17 plus 3 children
Guest lectures	Asako Osaki: How to involve people in the regions; Makoto Tajima, Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies: Renewable energy; Chiemi Kamada, Renshoan Kurashi no Gakko: Presentation about the non-profit, Renshoan Kurashi no Gakko

5. In Seattle

Theme	"Leadership for social change"
Date	5-11 Feb, 2017
Location	Seattle, Washington State, US
Participants	10
Facilitators & content	Izumi Yamamoto, iLEAP: A six-day program of inner development for women leaders from Tohoku

6. In Miyagi

Theme	"Leveraging diversity"
Date	12-14 May, 2017
Location	Zao Town, Yamamoto Town, Miyagi Prefecture
Participants	18 plus 4 children
Guest lectures	Tomoyuki Miura, Project Rias: Advancing solutions to regional problems without creating conflicts between different groups of people; Hiromi Taguchi, Polaris: Hints from childrearing and caring for disabled people regarding sustainable management; Kazumi Yoshida, team-building facilitator: leveraging diversity through experience, four characteristics of successful organizations; Makoto Tajima, Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies: Citizen's energy business models for the future of regions

7. In Miyagi

Theme	"Building teams"
Date	27-29 Oct, 2017
Location	Morioka City, Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture
Participants	17 plus 6 children and 3 student interns
Guest lectures	Naomi Yoshida, Asu Kara no Kurashi Sodan Shitsu: What matters for an inclusive society; Miyoko Sato, Manmaru Mama Iwate: Showing your weaknesses and building relationships with people close to you; Yasuhiro Otomo, Hanamaki Yamorisha: How to make towns full of innovators even as populations fall; Kazumi Yoshida, team-building facilitator: Team-building and behavioral characteristics

8. In Los Angeles

Theme	"Overcoming challenges and continuing to create social change"
Date	4-10 Feb, 2018
Location	Los Angeles, California, US
Participants	10
Content	Taking responsibility for one's lives, running non-profits, the meaning of resilient cities, exchange with immigrant women supporting the vulnerable, conversation with young LA women, site visit to community support initiatives in Hollywood, exchanging views with students at Occidental College, workshop on "strategic planning for non-profits," self-care, "from grassroots to global," "women's perspectives on disaster prevention" with the Red Cross, discussion with young women entrepreneurs, how to approach learning about giving support, dinner with Japanese-Americans, visit to TV station KABC, etc.

9. In Miyagi

Theme	"Sustaining one's activities"
Date	9-11 Nov, 2018
Location	Minamisanriku Town, Miyagi Prefecture
Participants	18 plus 3 children
Guest lectures	Mayumi Kudo, Minamisanriku Fukko Minasan Kai: Hints for sustainable town-making learned through failures; Craig Ishi, KIZUNA: Making projects advancing values needed by the region, presenting and explaining, how to present oneself

10. In Fukushima

Theme	"Working to repair connections"
Date	Date: 10-12 May, 2019
Location	Iizaka Onsen, Fukushima City, Fukushima Prefecture
Participants	15 plus 1 child
Guest lectures	Yuka Saito, WTR Facilitator; Mana Ito, Heart Creation; Megumi Miyata, Movement Medicine Japan

Chapter 4

The keys to the future held by local women

Sharing the lessons of the last ten years

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what gave me the courage to step forward while living in this town
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Shaping Futures with Local Women Project

what gave me the courage to step forward while living in this town

Empowering women who will shape the future of regions

In July 2019, Women's Eye received funding from the Chanel Foundation and started the three-year "Shaping Futures with Local Women Project." This works on empowering and networking young women active in Japan's regions, building on what Women's Eye have learned in Tohoku's disaster areas.

Contemporary Japan is on the frontline of issues like aging population, which are shaking the foundations of its social structure. Within this context, natural disasters striking frequently in recent years can be seen as bringing to the surface other existing issues, and taking those issues one step further. On the other hand, the number of cases where women display leadership and take on those issues is increasing. The women who WE met and walked alongside in the disaster regions are some of those women, taking steps forward with the desire to "do something."

However, women who act also suffer. Gender problems are deeply rooted in the regions, and we've seen women fall into depression under a barrage of insensitive comments. Furthermore, worrying about your relations with those around you, including family, is characteristic of life in rural areas.

When people talk about "women's advancement," there's a tendency to problematize the lack of women leaders in political and business circles. However, it's surely important to not only focus on raising up exceptional women. We also need to increase the number of women active in their immediate social circles. We believe that one of the keys for becoming a society where the presence of women leaders is "taken for granted" in every arena, is raising the level of women in regional society.

There are so many councils and committees, places where decisions are made. Is it really OK that in those places, men are the only ones gathering and

deciding the future of regions? We've not yet reached a point in local society where women can step forward naturally.

Telling the stories of local women, raising each other up

Because of this, we set up the Shaping Futures with Local Women Project, or "Local Women Project" for short, building on the experience that we gained during the Grassroots Academy Tohoku (p30). Our main targets are younger generations of women (16-45 years) already starting actions at the local level, as well as people working to empower regional women in various sectors.

Our core philosophy, also introduced in the opening page of this booklet, is the idea of "empowering grassroots." To that end, we focus on increasing women's power in each of the following three areas through the project.

- *The power to guide oneself...thinking for oneself, deciding for oneself, and acting oneself
- *The power to influence others...disseminating one's ideas, becoming a role model for the generations to come
- *Resilience...valuing the health of one's body and soul, tackling stress, and linking both of these to one's personal growth

In terms of concrete activities, we carry out things like trainings and lectures, both online and in person; provide mentoring and small-scale grants for regional activities under the "community action" initiative; and offer counseling at our headquarters in Minamisanriku. But in particular, we are pouring our efforts into offering information and networking opportunities. To those ends, we created the project website, "COMADO." Designed together with a designer from Kesennuma who participated in the Grassroots Academy Tohoku, the website contains ideas that we'd like to share with you.

This is COMADO, a place you encounter opportunities.

The place you live. The land where you were born and raised, somewhere you connected to by chance, or the land you choose to move to. Wherever you live, you want do so joyfully. You want to make it somewhere easier to live, a better place. But even if you are bubbling with ideas, sometimes, you feel powerless or lonely, right? It's OK. There are people who feel the same way, but little by little are changing their regions for the better. We provide small hints, stories from those experienced in taking action, and action plans for local women and those supporting them.

What we want to do with COMADO

After the Great East Japan Earthquake, some local women told us they wanted to be of use. Since then we have been walking alongside women from Tohoku, listening to their often unexpressed, inner feelings. By looking at COMADO, which is filled with the voices of those women, their know-how and experiences

We hope that other local women, and people who want to support those women, can think,

That's great! ...and imitate it, try it for themselves,

Sharing and understanding each other's experiences,

Encouraging each other, and building each other up. We want to provide an opportunity for that cycle to start.

The scope of the Local Women Project begins with the three Prefecture of Miyagi, Fukushima, and Iwate and extends to all of Japan's regions. When women impeded by social structural problems or cultural tensions begin to think and decide for themselves, to overcome their fears, and have the resilience to bounce back after setbacks, it will surely widen the base of women taking action and transform Japan's stagnating society.

(Text = Miki Shiimoto)

COMADO <https://comado.womenseye.net/>



Women active in various fields from COMADO's series, 100 Local Women's Stories.

The meaning of connecting to localities globally

In Women's Eye's Minamisanriku base, guests from various countries often visit for site tours, trainings, and suchlike. It might seem curious that a group doing small, local activities like Women's Eye is internationally connected in this way.

The start was when, through the Asian non-profit network that Ishimoto participates in, we were asked to coordinate a site tour for two women from India and Sri Lanka. They were leading figures in reconstruction support after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, and wanted to meet and listen to women who, like them, had been pouring their efforts into reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake. They hoped to share the knowledge each had gained through their respective experiences.

When we brought them together with young women active in Minamisanriku and Kesennuma, we were surprised at the levels of empathy and mutual learning, which deepened the more everyone talked. The places they live are far from each other, their cultural backgrounds different, and the level of harm inflicted by their respective tsunamis not the same. And yet, when each brought their own experiences and knowledge to the conversation, with a desire to encourage each other, those background differences, in fact, worked to illuminate the essence of what disasters mean. By bringing together people with particular experiences in particular places, we discovered the potential for forms of mutual support transcending national boundaries.

Through mixing with people from different backgrounds, one can escape from "frog in the well" ways of thinking and gain new

perspectives. The exchanges we did with the Huairou Commission, introduced on p30, the Grassroots Academy held in the United States, and the trainings held with the Japan International Cooperation Agency were examples of this.

Recently, through collaborations with teams from Chile and Argentina, we've held exchanges between women working to rebuild their areas through food-related programs in Chile's Talcahuano City and Minamisanriku, who have suffered from tsunamis on either side of the Pacific. Their exchanges were captured in the documentary film "Tsunami Ladies," which has screened at venues like disaster prevention events and exhibitions. The film is the first in a trilogy, with the others currently being edited.

Through these films, we hope that more people will understand the kinds of international exchanges that Women's Eye values.

(Text = Miki Shiimoto)

Togura's Women's Association receiving a JICA training



Women pursuing food businesses in Chile and Minamisanriku

Mingling and learning with women leaders from around the world



TSUNAMI LADIES

RESILIENT WOMEN FROM CHILE AND JAPAN, CONNECTED BY THE OCEAN



Resilience can be created anywhere, even at the kitchen table.

The first episode of the documentary "Tsunami Ladies" features six women from Chile and Japan who survived the massive tsunamis that devastated their villages in 2010 and 2011.

Three Chilean and Japanese cooks who survived a tsunami and led the reconstruction of their communities meet each other in Japan to share their stories and cook together. Food played a vital role in helping their communities rebuild and recover. The documentary celebrates these women who cooked for survivors during the crisis and helped revive their local economies.

The film was shot in Minamisanriku, Japan and Talcahuano, Chile in October 2019. As a JAPAN TEAM, Women's Eye cooperated in casting and filming coordination in Japan, as well as the production of the Japanese version.

A comment from the Producers

Victor and I are colleagues who work in communication and risk management. We are always looking for new ways to share the lessons that disasters teach us. The idea for this documentary came about over lunch with Victor. We thought about how food could be a language that allows us to share learning about disasters, through stories told by women. It is no coincidence that Rosa, Silvia and Ana María, in addition to cooking very well, are great storytellers. And we never imagined that they would have so much in common with Mieko, Akane and Tamiko. Traveling to Minamisanriku to film Tsunami Ladies was an unforgettable experience. With this documentary we try to show how culture helps us answer the questions that nature asks us.

Through another special connection across the ocean, we were introduced to Megumi Ishimoto and Women's Eye through renowned seismologist Dr. Lucy Jones (→p12) our partner in California. Megumi played a multiple roles in the project. She has been a partner, public relations expert, tourist guide, advisor, co-producer, and provider of emotional support. Megumi is a key behind-the-scenes Tsunami Lady. There would not be Tsunami Ladies without Megumi.

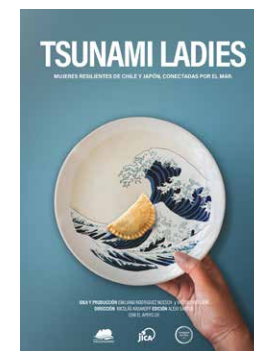
Emiliano Rodríguez Nuesch
Victor Orellana Acuña

List of premiere screening events

November 2020 Regional Online screening Spanish audiences
February 2021 Local Cinema Screening in Talcahuano, Chile
December 2021 Global Online screening English audiences
March 2021 Japanese Online Screening

Links

Website <https://www.tsunami-ladies.com/en/>
UNDRR webpage <https://www.undrr.org/event/undrr-roamc-wtad-documentary-tsunami-ladies>
Sendai Commitment https://sendaicommitments.undrr.org/commitments/20210203_001
Exhibition <https://moa.ubc.ca/exhibition/a-future-for-memory/>



"Tsunami Ladies" Record of Screening event episode#1 2019

THE LADIES

Mieko Matsuno Silvia Sepúlveda
Tamiko Abe Rosa Mora
Akane Onuma Ana María Badilla

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What approach is necessary for building capabilities?

In the 2020 edition of the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap index, Japan received the low rank of 121st in the world. A major reason for that low ranking was the lack of women occupying leadership positions in business and governance. To tackle this problem, WE is carrying out activities supporting women who live ordinary lives in the towns of northeastern Japan. The women they target might seem far from the image we have of leaders, such as corporate officers and politicians. But WE's staff are working at the grassroots, without neglecting a more global vision. This is because they believe that within the daily life of places like Tohoku's towns, characterized by very

conservative cultures, it's essential to look at the structural problems that affect Japanese women, and carefully work to build models for overcoming those problems.

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Within Japanese society, policies to promote women's empowerment have been implemented. However, the approach often taken is one of capacity development. For instance, providing educational opportunities for women, promoting their social advancement, increasing their business skills, and increasing awareness of women's rights have been tried across the country. Furthermore, regarding the recruitment and promotion of women in companies, policies responding to the problems that occur and consultations have been implemented. But despite all of this, we haven't overcome the gender gap. The reason is that even when Japanese women possess sufficient knowledge, they are not able to put that knowledge into practice, meaning the knowledge doesn't have the effect of enabling them to play key roles in wider society. As a result, many women feel disempowered, thinking that "for me, it's impossible." More than a capacity-building approach, what we need is empowerment

(a capability approach) through creating environments where women can take actions.

In the towns of northeastern Japan, local networks endure more than in cities. On the one hand, those networks create safety and stability. But on the other, there is a tendency within those relationships for conventional role expectations to remain fixed. When you worry about how the community will see you, you suppress feelings like, "I want to say what I think, to do something different from what is conventional." And that links to a suppression of your sense that you have rights or your trust in your own capacities. For people to become aware of their rights, that "it's OK for me to do this," it's essential that we make comprehensive efforts to increase support around them, provide advice, and change community relations. And WE are working to build models for achieving precisely these things.

Among WE's many activities, they provide many kinds of courses. However, a major role of those courses is creating





points of contact between local residents. Less emphasis is placed on numbers of participants, their satisfaction, or what they learned than how, through the course, participants get to know the staff and each other, begin to communicate, and to take small actions of their own. This is visible in how WE's monitoring and evaluation focuses on grasping the degree to which "participants change their daily lives."

Furthermore, WE's programs provide opportunities for people to voice their

own ideas, and put those ideas into practice alongside companions, creating experiences where people can exercise influence on others without fear. And the staff, by listening, give them opportunities to express those experience into words. This promotes awareness among people of what kind of psychological comfort (or "comfort zone") they need to speak up and take action, and becomes a process where through their relations with companions, counsellors, and people around them, they find and learn ways of maintaining that comfort.

How grassroots actions confront structural problems

To see this, we can look at the fact that the majority of applicants for support through the "community action" program did so after being recommended it by people that participated in WE's courses. Many of the actions being taken, based on awareness of local issues, tackle problems that in the regions people usually keep within the family, such as disability, home education, pre- and post-natal support, etc. Furthermore, although there were more than a

few people who couldn't put their problems clearly into words when they first applied, through repeated interviews they quickly learned to adjust. This shows how there are more than a few people that are not experienced with conveying their ideas about issues to other people. In other words, we can hypothesize that even when the people applying to this program felt problems in their lives, many of them didn't know where and who to turn to for advice.

There are apparently people like this who, after being told by people who had taken their courses that "WE will take you seriously," trusted them and applied for the program.

WE's efforts go like this: some of the people in a situation where they can't put their thoughts into words appear at their courses. When those people speak, they are trusted by those around them, and because "people I can trust will help me," those people with their latent challenges begin to do things. That "doing" is the outcome of the course, and it has a domino effect leading to applications to the community action project. The problem-solving outputs of those community actions, or outcomes where people learn that "it's OK to speak, it's OK to act," give birth to societal changes in the regions. Through producing these kinds of positive feedback loops in rural areas, WE is creating an inclusive model of empowerment where nobody is left behind.

It's really meaningful when grassroots activism tackles structural problems like this. Although it's important to create advanced role models, and show them to society, in a situation where all over Japan there are still women who "find it hard to voice my true thoughts," or think that "even if I say something, nothing will change" and "it won't matter if I do anything," there's a danger that

a gap will open between those pushing forward and those who think "it's impossible for me." This social structure, where it's hard for progressive role models to empower the whole, can be found not only in Tohoku, but all over Japan, even in companies and the business sector, even in political activities, you can think of it as everywhere. I think that an inclusive empowerment model, focused on local communities and based on a capabilities approach, has the potential to overcome the problems facing conventional models for women's advancement in Japan.

While I can positively evaluate structural problem-solving through leveraging the strength of the grassroots, of course WE also has issues. Putting these efforts into words, creating a model from them, and providing a clear image of the kinds of coordinators who can stimulate women's empowerment: these are the issues they now face. I hope that by overcoming them, WE can both root their model in the regions and see it widely deployed across regional boundaries. Furthermore, it's hard to convey the kinds of changes produced through these cycles. Another issue that WE must tackle is how to convey these changes through storytelling. For instance, WE are preparing a new website (p38) providing information on those experiences. I have high hopes for this website.

A group that puts empowerment at the center

The single mother's parent and child association, “wawawa”

Recognizing problems, valuing the voices of those facing them, and putting empowerment at the center of our practice. This is Women's Eye's way of doing things. As an example, we'd like to introduce the efforts of single mothers.



The people whom aid does not reach

Over the summer of 2011, volunteers from RQ (p15) brought aid to small evacuation centers or home evacuees local along the roughly 120km of coastline between Iwate's Ofunato City and Minamisanriku. And we came to hear from those volunteers about how single mothers were not doing well.

At that time, I was fighting to provide support to women in the evacuation center that Minamisanriku opened in Tome City, from holding salons and interviews to distributing aid and more. The Volunteer Center was overwhelmed managing the aid and volunteers coming from outside the prefecture, and although we understood that single mothers were struggling, we never got to the point of providing them with support. The fact that we couldn't do anything outside of provide aid is something that I regret to this day.

At that time, what was pivotal for me—who leaped into providing disaster aid with no experience—was the concept of “human security,” which I learned about before the tsunami. Proposed by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen, “human security” is a way of thinking that puts people at the center, emphasizing how, particularly during wars or disasters, preserving lives, ways of living, and dignity requires both protection and empowerment. At the actual places where support was being provided, however, even though the spotlight was on visible support and helping with survivor's own efforts, I learned from private talks in the corners of evacuations centers or non-public parts of temporary housing how women and the vulnerable were facing severe difficulties.

When disaster strikes, people already in a weak position in the region fall easily into deeper troubles, and it's hard for aid to reach people who can't raise their voices in the first place. Although I felt

angry hearing about these injustices, I didn't know what I could do about them, and until the winter of 2012, continued to simply collect stories from hundreds of women in the area.

Women who poured out stories about the straightjacket of being labeled their family's “daughter,” “wife,” or “mother”; stories of experiencing domestic violence or harassment, but still saying, “because I can't live anywhere but here, there's nothing I can do but grin and bear it.” Nobody could voice their opinions publicly, so they just said “that's the way it is,” “there's nothing to be done.” The lack of women in places where decisions about the evacuation centers and their areas were made, the strongly gendered division of labor in and outside the home: the injustices hiding in the region became visible to me.

In the words of Sadako Ogata, “to face these enormous, complicated problems, it's necessary to begin by facing up to

the widespread, serious threats that people face now.” Even when a problem feels enormous, I realized that you begin creating change from within the small domain that surrounds you.

A single mother peer group: if there aren't any, we'll start one

Around the beginning of 2013, when the knitting classes (p17) had calmed down, I began looking into support for single mothers in Tome City and along the Sanriku Coast. I learned that most people had no support organizations or peer groups near them. So, we thought about starting a group where single mothers could listen to each other, and began asking people in the region about making such a group.

After a while, we were introduced to some older single mothers and those in their twenties. When we talked to them, we learned that although they felt like

it would be nice to start such a group, they already had their hands full with their own lives, and didn't know if they'd be able to keep it up. However, when we said we would prepare the space and take over the organization, they decided to "first give it a go."

The Single Mothers Association kicked off in Tome City in June 2013. During the first meeting, experienced single mothers shared their stories, people introduced themselves to each other while eating sweets, and then danced to Momoiro Clover along with their children. The next month, after hearing that "because it's hard for a mother and child to prepare together, we've never held a BBQ," we decided to host a BBQ in Minamisanriku's Kamiwari campsite. Although we began with four families from Tome and Minamisanriku, through word-of-mouth the number slowly grew, and across the ten meetings we held during the year, 12 families comprising 27 mothers and children participated.

There was something that we kept saying to participants, because it's important. That was, "however trivial the issue seems, please decide it yourselves." For instance, while it's simple for those providing support to decide the date or place, if somebody else makes decisions for you every time, then you'll never

come to perceive it as "your group." To decide the dates or places yourselves, it's necessary to talk, conveying what is convenient for you and asking what is convenient for other participants. "However trivial the issue seems, please decide it yourselves" meant them expressing their own views and understanding that it's OK to say something different from the others. It meant creating a space where everyone's opinions could be heard, and doing that over and over creates opportunities for self-determination leading to empowerment.

Suffering from, and dealing with, the rural gaze

From local aid workers, we received the advice that it's important to formalize the association, with a constitution, electing a chairperson and deputy chairperson. The reason is that in the regions, how you are seen by those around you matters. On the other hand, we felt it was necessary for those involved to decide things by themselves, one at a time, and gradually shape the association with their own hands. When I tried to explain this to local people, they pushed back, claiming "you're saying this for your own convenience." Although I listened with gratitude to advice from those worried about us, I decided to make myself "insensitive" to that advice when it contradicted our goals.

To get word out about the group to interested parties, we put flyers in shops, and advertisements on Facebook. But in the beginning, nobody showed up. In a small rural area, they were scared to take part in a group when they didn't know who else would be there.

Furthermore, participating in a group of single mothers led to gossip. Hearing that people in the region were taking note of who was participating, we tried experimenting with the location and manner of gathering so that others wouldn't find out who was there. How to allow participants to come safely given the gossip? You could feel how strong regional biases were... We faced this problem many times.

The birth of the Single Mothers Parent and Child Association "wawawa"

In April 2014, the chair and deputy chair decided independently to make the group an unincorporated association, opening a bank account and appointing a financial officer. "This is not just a group where we talk about our troubles, but an association where we grow together," the participants told us. They decided on the name "wawawa," which reminded them of talking noisily (waiwai), laughing together (waraiau) and forming a circle (wa wo tsukuru).

Until then, we had changed the date every time, but a view was formed that it's easier for people to participate if there's a fixed day, so in the second year, it was decided that the group would meet on the second Sunday of every month. The core members debated how to welcome new members and how to make it easy for members old and new to talk comfortably. In our supporting role, we didn't say a single thing, waiting patiently for things to be decided spontaneously.

As the meetings piled up, and people got closer to each other, some of them began to talk about their personal circumstances. Single pregnant women came for advice, with people crying at each other's stories and encouraging each other. When we felt unable to give advice, as neither specialists nor single mothers ourselves, we sought it from Chieko Akaishi, director of the nonprofit Single Mothers Forum. Akaishi started coming once or twice a year from Tokyo to visit. She lent her ear to the women who gathered, empathized with them, and supported them, and everybody said how encouraging this was.

The presence of volunteers watching over the children

When we held a self-respect training by the counselling professional Naoko



The children's favorite, balloon art, during the Christmas party



Volunteers playing with children at Tategamori Ark Farm

Takayama in 2015, 11 mothers and 17 children gathered. What allowed those mothers to focus on “turning weaknesses into strengths” was the fact that volunteers were present looking after their children. Most of the young volunteers who attended the meetings were like big brother or sister figures for those children. Every year, at Halloween or Christmas, volunteers would come from Tokyo and transport those children to another world through activities like balloon art. The mothers, children, and volunteers all gathered because the association was important to them, fostering a warm and relaxing atmosphere.

In the twelve months after June 2016, we held a computer training program called All Together MOS! ^(*)2), with seven groups of parents and children, each of whom participated three to four times.

Thanks to comprehensive cooperation from local volunteers, we could borrow space in a house located in the middle of nature, and the children could play to their heart's content in that environment, digging for bamboo and eating nagashi-somen (fine white noodles served outdoors in a flume). Wanting to help out because their mothers were studying, the children also helped prepare the food together, and the volunteers were moved by their growth.

“wawawa” since then

In the four years from June 2013 to July 2017, we held 36 meetings, with seventeen families comprising 44 people participating. Add in staff and volunteers, and the number reaches 732, with the ages of children at the time ranging from eight months to eleven years.

Mothers and children from Kesennuma and the Sendai area made the slightly longer journey because they had no such groups near them, or wanted to avoid the gossip that would arise if they took part in things locally.

Since then, children have got bigger, people have changed jobs or remarried, and from 2017 onward, opportunities for everyone to get together became fewer. But in the 2020 new year gathering, eighteen people comprising seven families, staff, and volunteers celebrated the new year together again.

The single mother survey project established in response to COVID-19

When fear of the new coronavirus infection began spreading in March 2020, we thought immediately of single mothers' situation after the tsunami and the

parents and children from the wawawa group. In this new catastrophe, would those in a weak position, such as single mothers, not be pushed into further hardships...?

At this point, in order to gather data and testimonies about what long-term effects the situation might have on single-mother households and what kinds of circumstances they were facing, we formed a survey team together with Single Mothers Forum ^(*)3), researchers, and policy experts.

Building understanding from the ground up is just as important as visible aid, particularly during an emergency. The results are not yet visible. However, even small steps now can lead to changes in future years.

(Text = Megumi Ishimoto)

(*)2) Microsoft Office Expert

(*)3) https://note.com/single_mama_pj/



Learning Excel in 2016 at All Together MOS!



Keep sowing small seeds

Mayumi Kudo

(Shinto Priestess, Kaminoyama Hachimangu)

Mayumi Kudo

Shinto Priestess at Kaminoyama Hachimangu shrine, from Minamisanriku's Shizugawa district. Board member of Women's Eye since 2020. As a member of the general incorporated association Fukko Minasan Kai, has worked on projects such as the Minamisanriku Tsubaki Story, and continues to be active in neighborhood planning through her group Kamome no Niji-iro Kai. Also a Gogyohka poet.

Due to fear of the new coronavirus currently spreading around the world, each one of us has lost our freedom to do various things. The situation is very serious. There are even people who say, this is a war. However, at the same time, our mother earth has tasted fear, pain, and suffering through our ways of living, and although the scale is different, one can think of this as a situation where we in turn are tasting those things.

The poem Coronavirus Letter to Humanity, uploaded to social media by a woman called Vivienne R. Reich, has circulated around the world. In that poem, just as forests fires continue burning due to global warming, human beings experience fever, and as pollution covers the earth itself with a gray film, people find they cannot breathe. Now more than ever, we are realizing that it's necessary for us to not only think about ourselves, but also the life of the planet. Ideally, each society should resume its activities through sharing in this great reimagining, and furthermore, if we don't do this, I think we will find ourselves being tested the same way time and again.

I believe that Women's Eye have felt this sense of

urgency from long before, which is why they have developed their projects with a view to improving society. In the wind and rain, they have waited for the moment to sow small seeds, scooping the women who keep sowing those seeds from the roaring flow of our society, with their gentler gaze, and then sowing more seeds together with those women. I believe that to slow down the pace of this era, where we are rushing headlong into dark clouds, and restore the planet to health, this sense of mission and purpose is more necessary than ever.

We are remembering, today, that we live together on this one round, blue earth. We are remembering that blue oceans connect us all, and no borders really exist between countries. We are realizing that you, and I, are the earth itself. We understand that someone else's pain is also our pain, and we need to help each other.

We must never forget, as we face the future, that things we cannot see are trying to tell us something. They are telling us that even now, as the whole world comes to a halt and we suffer so many lost lives, that we all need to join hands. Please keep supporting Women's Eye, as they seek to grasp the next woman's hand.

VISION

A society where women use their capacities and play active roles

MISSION

To become a platform where women connect with their region and society

To create chances for women to gain the strength they need

To convey the voices of women who've experienced disaster inside and outside Japan

*Vision mission is as of 2020

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