

Sea, people and life

The annual meeting of a forum of entrepreneurial fisherwomen's groups throws up important questions regarding the survival and future of Japan's fishing communities

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In Japan, women's groups in the fisheries began to emerge after the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. The Conference encouraged the Japanese authorities to support the development of women entrepreneurship in the country's various economic sectors. By the year 1998, 1,158 women's groups in fisheries had been formed under the umbrella of the Fisheries Cooperative Association (FCA), the main organization representing the coastal fisheries sector in Japan. The members of these women's groups were the wives of fishers who supported the fisheries enterprise by developing other economic activities that could add to the family income. The decrease in fish production and the increase of fishing-related expenditure were among the main reasons for expanding the economic options available to fisheries enterprises and households. For the newly-formed women's groups, the most important activities were the processing and marketing of fish products. Other important activities included the selling of fresh fish, running restaurants, organizing the delivery of at-home meals services, and so on.

One of the main challenges that the women's groups initially faced concerned marketing. A successful marketing strategy demands that the development of new products be accompanied by the establishment of markets. But since this was not the case here,

each of the new women's groups faced the same problem: a range of new products with no market to absorb them. Each group tried to promote its products locally within the community. The groups began to seek the help of researchers working at the community level. Most of the researchers they contacted happened to be women working on issues concerning the participation of fisherwomen in the fisheries and in coastal communities. The researchers initially responded to the fisherwomen's groups individually, but soon merged their efforts and tried to evolve a common response to the collective problems of women's groups. This was the impetus behind the establishment, in 2003, of the Japanese forum Umi Hito Kurashi, which roughly translates as "Sea, People, Life".

The forum began informally, but as fund-raising efforts grew, it became more geographically widespread. Through a blog and biannual newsletters, it tried to act as an information and resource base for fisherwomen to increase their knowledge about unfamiliar issues. Every year, a face-to-face annual meeting helped consolidate the working of this otherwise loose forum. At each annual meeting, an issue selected by forum members would receive focus. During the nine years of its life, some of the issues that the forum has taken up include processing techniques, marketing, and product quality.

With the establishment of the forum, the fisherwomen began to play a vital role both in the economic life of the fisheries sector as well in their communities. They began to develop and explore new and hitherto unknown capacities such as entrepreneurship and marketing. Some women even began to sell their products at the national level and were able to increase not just their own income considerably, but also that of the women working with them.

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Participants at the 10th annual meeting of the Umi Hito Kurashi Forum in September 2013. The Forum highlighted the problem of decrease in young people in fisheries

A significant change that occurred during this period was the decrease in the number of fisherwomen's groups in Japan. While in 1998, there were over a thousand such groups, by 2012, only 364 could be counted across the country. Another equally significant change was that a third of the fisherwomen's groups now no longer operated under the authority of the FCA. Since the FCA was increasingly seen as an obstacle to innovative functioning and the development of new markets, some of the groups began branching off to work independently. The women leading the breakaway groups began reporting being able to work more effectively after freeing themselves from the paternalistic influence of men.

In September 2013, the tenth annual meeting of the forum was held in Tokyo. This meeting was unlike all the previous ones. For the first time, women not only discussed the experiences they had as part of working in their groups, but also spoke about the future of the forum. Should they work towards building a more structured national network, or continue with the forum in its present form—loose and informal? To help answer this question, women were asked to share their vision of how they saw both the forum and their communities evolving over the next ten years. To aid this process of reflection, two women—one, a French oyster farmer, and the other, a European scientist, both of whom are associated with the European network AKTEA—were invited to share their experiences on women's organizations. Both explained that before deciding on the question of establishing a national network, there should be a thorough discussion on why a formal network might be important and what benefits it might offer.

The participants were then divided into three sub-groups with each sub-group discussing a different set of issues—what is a desirable future for fisheries communities and what actions should be taken to move in that direction; how can the diversification of activities be facilitated; what training needs exist and how these may be addressed. Each of the three groups also shared its vision regarding the future of the forum. At the end of the meeting, it was decided that decision making regarding the structure of the forum would be postponed to the following year. It was also decided that all the vision statements that were shared—and there were many!—would be compiled by the facilitators and published in the forum's newsletter. The women also resolved to break the silence surrounding their work and plans, and communicate more regularly with one another. Everyone agreed that it was vital for the rest of society, particularly politicians, to be made aware of all the action that the groups and the forum were taking to ensure the survival of the fisheries and coastal communities.

An important observation made during the meeting concerned a problem that all fishing communities in Japan faces today: the decrease in the number of young people who want to be fishers. The average age of people living in fishing communities in Japan is now 60 years. Elderly people are the main labour force within these communities.

Clearly, the future of the fisheries is untenable unless young people take their place. Some activities like oyster farming are attracting a young, temporary, migrant and largely female workforce (see Page 2). But there is no doubt that the future of Japan's fishing communities rests primarily with the youth. ■

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