

Higashi Matsushima residents show the progress they have made so far, with pictures taken immediately after the earthquake and a recovery plan map.



Sorting disaster debris. This project employs women who were not working before and people who lost their jobs in the disaster. (Photo: Higashi Matsushima)



Women in the Nobiru district grow herbs as part of a local-products project. They sometimes host Indonesian participants through JICA's grass-roots project.



Women Planning Together, Learning from One Another

Disaster recovery and gender issues are often intertwined. As Japanese cities devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake continue to rebuild, their residents find empowerment in sharing the lessons they have learned. In December of 2016, Higashi Matsushima in Miyagi Prefecture hosted a forum for local residents and JICA participants from other countries that have experienced natural disasters. The forum highlighted the importance of considering both women's strengths and vulnerabilities in the aftermath of a disaster.

JICA PARTICIPANTS VISITED THE NOBIRU CIVIC CENTER

The tsunami caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 flooded 65% of Higashi Matsushima's central area facing Ishinomaki Bay. Over 5,500 buildings and houses were destroyed, and 3% of the city's population died or went missing. Six years on, as part of an effort to speed up reconstruction of residential areas and relocate residents en masse, Higashi Matsushima is advancing a project to accelerate collective relocation for disaster prevention. This project is creating new communities in safer locations.

The largest among these relocated communities is the Nobiru North Hill District in the western part



Participants listen intently to the residents. It was a rare opportunity for them to hear firsthand experiences.

of the city. The district is located on a leveled hillside on high ground. Nobiru station of the JR Senseki Line, which was destroyed by the tsunami, has been moved to this area. Construction of houses for relocated residents began last summer.

As part of the residential area development, the Nobiru Civic Center opened here in November of 2016. And in December, 17 government officials and members of non-governmental organizations working in disaster prevention and gender issues visited the center. Representing six countries including Nepal and Pakistan, they were participants in a Knowledge Co-Creation Program called Gender and Diversity in Disaster Risk Reduction, a program that has been run by JICA since 2015. As part of the program, the participants joined a forum to exchange opinions with residents of Higashi Matsushima.

Women face particular problems after a disaster, not only in developing countries but also in Japan. For example, violence against women occurred in evacuation shelters and temporary housing facilities after the Great East Japan Earthquake. In areas where many people have traditional values and are not receptive to women working outside the home, young single mothers have often found themselves alienated economically and socially. This forum provided a venue for people from developing countries and Japan to share their experiences, with a focus on finding ways to include women's perspectives in a search for solutions to disaster-related challenges.

LIVELY DISCUSSION LEADS TO A CHANGE IN RESIDENTS' AWARENESS

At the forum, JICA participants and local Japanese community members split into discussion groups. The visitors raised questions such as, "How did Higashi Matsushima residents and the city build consensus over the relocation to higher ground?" One participant observed, "In Pakistan, even if the government makes a relocation plan for a disaster-affected area, many choose to stay where they live because of their ancestors or jobs."

Another participant said, "Sri Lanka has experienced natural disasters and conflict, and the frequency of sexual assaults and the number of single mothers are growing – these are serious problems. In Japan, how do you incorporate women's safety and security into disaster prevention plans?"

In response, local residents including primary

school teachers, firefighters, and members of the Nobiru Community Development Council shared their own experiences. For instance, to build consensus, they said that they had made an effort to hear from as many people as possible, assigning a coordinator to each temporary housing facility to collect the residents' opinions while holding community meetings as well. Although the community meetings had no women attending at first, the groups reached out to the community to actively encourage women to participate. As a result, at some local community meetings, women now constitute over 40% of attendants and it is easier to understand and respond to their needs.

The council members sometimes learn indirectly about the needs of those who find it difficult to join the meetings, such as persons with disabilities. "One time, a boy asked me how women in wheelchairs could evacuate in a disaster," a council member said. "So I brought this up at the next meeting, and we created an evacuation route for people in wheelchairs."

"Hearing their stories is quite helpful to figuring out how to better address gender issues in the recovery process," a female Sri Lankan participant said smilingly after the discussion. One male participant from Bhutan said, "This talk has reaffirmed the importance for me of women's roles. I was especially impressed to hear how women in the affected area were involved in a project to sort and recycle most of the debris from collapsed buildings."

On the other side of the discussions, Keiko Sakurai, Vice-President of the Nobiru Community Development Council, participated in the forum as a member of the resident group. She said, "I was surprised to know that women's social participation rate is higher in the participants' countries than in Japan. I am the only female board member on the council, and I realized that we could do better." Forum coordinator Rie Fusamae of IC Net Co., Ltd., a consulting firm that provides technical assistance to developing countries suggested, "Some participants are from countries where gender equality efforts are more advanced than in Japan. So I believe that the visiting participants also offered some insights to the residents."

"The city of Higashi Matsushima conducts various international cooperation activities other than this forum," said Midori Kamada from the JICA Tohoku Office, which organized the forum. "We believe that interaction with people from overseas, including disaster-affected areas, gives Higashi Matsushima residents a sense of togetherness and encourages them to strive for recovery." She said that the residents gained new ideas for regional revitalization from foreign visitors.

"In the future, I think there will be more and more international cooperation projects like this one, in which members of local communities in Japan and developing countries learn from each other, building relationships that lead to the creation of new ideas," she said.

This forum forged new cooperative relationships between residents of different disaster-affected areas. In the future, such relationships will serve as a driving force to further promote social participation of women in times of disaster.



A community workshop for reconstruction planning was held after the earthquake at an evacuation center. Many women participated in the workshop. (Photo: Higashi Matsushima)