

# Light in the Dark

Ten Women's Stories of Hope, Woven Across the World

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## Foreword

What is the greatest adversity you've ever faced? The kind that felt like a wall in your life?

This book shares the stories of ten women from different corners of the world who have each faced and overcome their own adversities.

War, earthquakes, poverty, illness, violence, separation from family—

Despite facing tremendous hardship, the following pages tell the life stories of women who have kept walking their paths with resilience and strength.

They are not names etched in history, nor are they well-known activists.

They do not offer polished formulas for success.

Instead, this is an honest record of people who have lived with sincerity, still searching for light even in what felt like hopeless darkness.

Perhaps you, holding this book, are standing still before a wall in your own life right now.

Maybe you've nearly lost sight of yourself amid society's expectations or someone else's values, or find yourself unable to see

hope for tomorrow.

Perhaps it is in the midst of such days that you have found your way to this book.

In their interviews, these women spoke with warmth and gentleness:

"Even if not here and now, you will find your place. What matters is 'to keep living.'"

"My weaknesses are also my strengths. They are part of who I am."

"I don't know whether life was difficult. I just kept doing what I had to do."

This book is a small token of encouragement for you who may be fighting alone today.

May the thoughts of the women beyond these pages stay gently with you, and give you a small bit of courage to think, *Maybe I will take just one more step tomorrow.*

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JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 1

# Weaknesses becoming strengths

The journey of a jewelry artist  
who forged her life from emptiness



### **Michiko Kusakari**

Founder of the custom-made jewelry studio, Lipatti Jewelry. Born in Shiogama City, Miyagi Prefecture in 1982. After graduating from Waseda University, she worked for financial and other similar institutions in Tokyo. Following a job loss during pregnancy, she was inspired by the Great East Japan Earthquake to reflect on what she could do while raising her newborn. This journey led her to establish Lipatti Jewelry in Sendai. The name “Lipatti” was inspired by the Romanian piano prodigy Dinu Lipatti.

There are weaknesses that we hesitate to share—pasts we want to forget, wounds we avoid looking at. Yet, as Michiko Kusakari, founder of the custom-made jewelry studio Lipatti Jewelry, says, it is precisely these things that open the door to connection with others.

**"Directly facing your own shortcomings is the greatest kindness you can do for yourself."**

Michiko's words, spoken with a smile, reach out like a gentle hand to those who may be frozen before life's obstacles. From the dissolution of her family to homelessness, and even the Great East Japan Earthquake . . . being pushed into these many "empty" situations, each time, she took the initiative, built relationships with people, and pioneered a new path.

## **The warmth of family was learned from my grandmother**

Michiko's relationship with her parents was far from harmonious; from an early age, it stood as one of life's first obstacles for her. Even when exchanging words, they would talk past each other. Unable to express her true feelings, she eventually gave up—and that became part of daily life.

"From the time I was little, due to my parents' personalities, I was never able to communicate well with them. No matter what I said, the words never reached them. They just didn't understand. So, when I was young, I did not understand the true meaning of family.

"Amid those circumstances, it was my grandmother who was the bridge between me and my parents, and who taught me about the warmth of family and the essence of humanity. When I came down with a high fever, my grandmother rushed to me over mountain roads 40 minutes away, and she gently patted me to soothe my feverish body. That was the first time I had experienced that kind of care, so I still vividly remember it. At first, I thought, 'Why is she patting me like this?' But gradually, it turned into comfort. It was the first time I understood what it meant to be cared for by someone.

"Now I have a husband and a daughter. Having a family makes me feel like my place in the world is defined: I am someone's wife and someone's mother. Because of these relationships, there is a sense that I am 'human.'

**"I don't see myself as an isolated individual, but as someone shaped within these relationships.** So family is like the closest, warmest 'boundary line' between oneself and the outside world."

## **Losing a home while aiming for university**

Michiko, who longed to seek comfort from her parents during the time she needed it most, continued to suffer, even though she was blessed with her grandmother's love. In the summer of her third year of high school, her father's company went bankrupt, and her family dissolved, scattering its members. They lost their house, and she stayed at her uncle's house temporarily, but left soon after because she began to feel like she was imposing. With nowhere to turn, Michiko became homeless for a time. She kept studying for her

university entrance exams, spending her nights in a bus terminal waiting room.

"At a sushi restaurant nearby, I would only order the 50-yen 'arajiru' (fish-bone soup) each day, which was a special side item, but one day the owner must have sensed my situation and started serving me extra portions. Then, with my stomach somewhat full, I returned to the express bus waiting room and opened my English vocabulary workbook again. . . . In those days, I felt like a stray cat."

Even as she prepared for entrance exams, she could not afford adequate study materials, nor did she have a safe place to devote herself to her studies. She could not tell anyone around her and felt like an outsider. Yet, she did not give up—being accepted to Waseda University was the only way to prove her existence at that time.

"Being backed into a corner, I was driven by the feeling 'I will rise above everyone else!' I resolved to make it into a prestigious university in one shot. Waseda University was my father's alma mater, but because of a series of student protests, he was unable to graduate. A part of my motivation was also wanting to graduate from the university that my father never finished. To that end, I absolutely wanted to pass on my first try. Thinking of it now, since I had neither a home nor money, I had no choice but to believe in my future self. Even at a disadvantage, I did not want things to end there.

"And so, at night, while fighting my hunger, I opened my English vocabulary workbook and studied in the express bus waiting room. The fruits of my labor paid off, and I was admitted into the university. Though my tuition was covered by a scholarship, I had to cover my living expenses by working part-time jobs seven days a week. Working late into the night, waking up and heading straight to class . . . that was the continuous cycle of my life.

"However, I was in a 'rise-from-the-ashes' mode: I genuinely felt that since I had been homeless, there was no more for me to lose. My goal was not to enter university—it was 'rebirth.' In order to become a national public servant, I studied intensely and saved money, and achieving that goal was like a positive kind of revenge."

## **Channeling the helplessness from my grandmother's death and the quake into motivation**

While at university, Michiko aimed to become a national public servant, but abandoned that ambition due to various circumstances. After graduating, she worked for a financial institution in Tokyo, and after that, got married and had a child. It was what one might call a "shotgun wedding," and as a result, she lost her job. Life with a newborn began, but then the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. Seeing the devastation in her hometown of Miyagi on TV, she was overcome with remorse and asked herself, "What am I even doing right now?"

"I was living in a place far away when things were tough there in my hometown. As a stay-at-home mom caring for a newborn, I could not even rush to volunteer. I carried an immense sense of guilt that I was the only one who could not do anything. Afterward, I learned the term 'away blues,' and it all fell into place. This feeling was heavier than I imagined, and it was tough to a degree that surprised even me.

"Desperately searching for something I could do at that moment, what I arrived at was sharing quick recipes that could be made with limited ingredients on my blog.

"I've always loved cooking, and every day spent raising my kid while taking photos and updating my blog was enjoyable. I felt as though I had been saved when comments from readers said things like, 'Thank you!' or 'This was helpful!' **It felt like I was being useful.**"

The blog eventually reached 400,000 page views a day. In response to the requests of the readers acquired there, Michiko also started creating and selling handmade jewelry. But just as she began to look forward, her grandmother, an extremely important figure in her life, passed away. It was one year after the quake.

**"When you put effort into something and share it with someone important to you, I believe it gives you a sense of living and hope.** With my grandmother—who had such a big presence in my life—gone, there was no reason left for me to keep pushing myself in Tokyo. I felt utterly alone, as if my heart had snapped clean in two. I had to do something to move forward, or I would end up in a

critical situation. That realization prompted me to return to Miyagi. I felt that if I started working in my hometown, I might be able to contribute financially."

## **Summoned to her true calling—the jewelry profession—by memories of stones and light**

It was no mere coincidence that Michiko ended up entering the jewelry profession. Memories and sensations accumulated since childhood seemed to guide her, gently leading her toward the world of jewelry.

Due to her father's civil engineering business, her childhood home was in an area that was like a temporary storage site for earth and sand. Due to the unique characteristics of Shiogama, the area where she was born and raised, heaps of leftover earth were piled like mountains, layered with a mixture of strata from various eras. Michiko, who was in poor health as a child, spent the time she could not attend school in those mountains, living days interacting with stones, fossils, and minerals.

"As a child, I constantly played with these stones, which had been formed over thousands, even tens of thousands of years. Before I knew it, I could tell just by looking at a stone what its properties were and what type it was. It seemed I was extremely sensitive to the way light reflected and colors blended. That sense remained even after becoming an adult. After experimenting with cooking and

toy-making, when I started working with natural stones, I felt certain that 'this is the right path for me.' When I went to source stones, I could tell the type, quality, and value of the stones at first glance. The dealers were surprised, saying, 'You have an uncanny eye for identifying gemstones.'

"I think that the appeal of gemstones is their color—infinite variations of color, and the unique expression of light held by each substance. In that, it almost resembles a person, where not one color is the same—they are all special. That is why, through jewelry, I wanted to shape a 'light unique to each person.'"

Michiko's jewelry making involves both science and sensibility—she carefully examines the geological background of the minerals while transforming the wearer's unspoken feelings into form and color.

"I want to pass something down, but its design is outdated, and it does not suit me or my children now,' are some of the requests I receive. **My job is to listen carefully to the memories contained in each piece and reweave them into a new shape. In other words, I think it is like being a 'translator of light.'**"

## **Starting a local jewelry studio**

Upon returning to Miyagi, Michiko started Lipatti Jewelry all alone. She began delivering custom-made jewelry to customers nationwide online. Although she had returned to her hometown, she had no

money or personal connections. However, the desire to respond to someone was the one thing that remained.

"The feeling of wanting to do something was unexpectedly persistent. So, I decided to take a risk. However, I had no money to buy materials, so I truly started from zero. I had only about 10,000 yen on hand, so I borrowed from my daughter's child allowance. Even now, I treat my daughter to coffee or tea, telling her it is 'Because I'm in your debt.' [laughs]

"By posting different pieces online, orders for my jewelry gradually started coming in. Thanks to everyone's support, I was able to set up both a workshop and a physical storefront.

"Jewelry is something for celebration, so it might not seem directly useful in daily life. However, I think that they can become turning



points in life and connect one person to another. That is why I value receiving someone's feelings and turning them into something tangible. **Nothing makes me happier than being able to help others while interacting with them like that. I feel a sense of responsibility as a creator, and believe that making jewelry is what I should be doing.**"

The first piece Michiko made was a request for earrings for a reader on her blog, something that "could confidently be worn at a wedding." She named the piece "Lawrence," derived from the laurel wreath, a symbol of victory and honor. She continues to create jewelry based on conversations with her clients, with no end in sight.

"Jewelry is not just a 'decoration' to enhance someone's appearance; I believe that it also embodies a person's resolve and prayers and is something that can make a person happy. In fact, they touch the wearer's skin, become a part of their body, accompany them wherever they go, and outlive us, don't they? Forever—both the gemstones and metals used in jewelry. It is something that exists alongside life and death, and that is why I consider what sentiment the client wishes to convey through the gift or what occasions they envision wearing it. As much as I can, I listen closely and try to reflect those feelings in the jewelry."

## **A team that embraces "vulnerability"**

Many of those working at Lipatti Jewelry are women who are currently raising children. Though there was not necessarily a clear philosophy for team building in the beginning, the inception was from friends who reached out to Michiko, who had been working alone at home, saying, "I will help, too."

"I was getting tendonitis while writing thank-you letters to customers, so a relative living in temporary housing offered to help, saying, 'I have nothing to do, so I will write them for you.' While working against looming deadlines, my mom friends offered their help too, taking care of other things. After that, the person who fixed my bicycle, seeing my distress, joined our team as a metal engraver. . . . Seeing my shortcomings, the people around me naturally stepped in, creating an atmosphere of mutual support, as if saying, 'Well, that's just how things go.' This accumulated over time and is how our current team came to be.

"Members caring for small children said, 'I will take care of the rest of this at home,' which prompted us to adopt remote work; for those who voiced only wanting to work in the mornings due to child drop-off and pickup needs, we created a part-time packaging position; we also allow members to bring their children to work. It is precisely because we are such considerate friends that we were able to make a comfortable way of working a reality while raising children. Since there are many things that I cannot do myself, I want to properly address each voice.

**"Standing by someone's shortcoming and accepting them without judgment**—there really are not many places where you can show that kind of vulnerability. But when you are able to bring that out, I find that people can truly connect with one another."

Perhaps it is because such an atmosphere exists that Lipatti Jewelry is loved by both its customers and its employees.

## **Becoming accustomed to loss means the ability to restart, again and again**

Lipatti Jewelry launched in 2013. Michiko garnered fervent support from repeat customers, but a crisis befell her. This occurred around 2023, just as things began to subside after the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020.

"Entering the COVID pandemic, online sales became the primary method since we were unable to meet customers in person. Up until then was the 'handmade bubble' when handmade items were all the rage, but as the pandemic subsided, that wave also subsided, and the company's working capital steadily dwindled."

Lipatti Jewelry's business had originally operated successfully online, but the handmade industry as a whole became even more reliant on online platforms due to the COVID pandemic. In light of that situation, Michiko placed even greater importance than before on meeting with customers in person and engaging in dialogue. It

was a return to origins—back when she first created jewelry.

"Reflecting on that time, my thought was that I wanted us to be more open to the local community. Of course, as a Miyagi-based business, I think that we contribute in ways like taxes and employment. But since we are operating in my hometown, I really wanted to meet customers face-to-face. So, we set up a gallery, and after that, we began opening pop-up stores in department stores and started a 'pilgrimage' nationwide.

"It was a critical situation, but the reason I did not retreat into a shell or stubbornly adhere to the old way of doing things is because, I believe, I was 'accustomed to loss.

"I have experienced restarting many times up to this point: during high school, during the earthquake, and even returning to Miyagi. During those times, when I start something, I always repeat to myself, perhaps even presumptuously, that 'I will be alright.' I take pride in reaching out to others, giving my all, and acting faster and more extensively than most people. Because I have rolled through life while clearing a path like that, perhaps it allows me to let go of the ways I have done things up until now."

## **"Empty" — the resource called "weakness"**

To date, there have been many scenes within Michiko's own life that could be described as "empty": her family's dissolution, experiencing homelessness, the earthquake disaster, and the loss of her grandmother. . . . Amid her loneliness, she faced helplessness

and vulnerability many times over.

Every time, she built relationships from scratch, rolled up her sleeves, and cleared a path. The driving force behind it might be what one would call "resilience."

"Fundamentally, I think that I am someone who needs help from others. Simply by my existing, my family might be happy, but taking that one extra step makes me feel connected to society. Just by thinking of doing something, momentum builds, and a connection with others is born. I have felt that chain reaction over and over.

"When it feels like you are surrounded by utter hopelessness, you might be placing yourself in a 'higher position.' Viewing 'having nothing' as your starting point makes things much easier. Though there may be little that I can do on my own, there are times when I can rely on others' help, and conversely, times when I can also lend my own strength. I think society is like a jigsaw puzzle, by bringing together both what each person can and cannot do.

"If you temporarily return to an empty state, I think that connections will begin to form—just like air rushing in to fill a vacuum."

And one more thing: Michiko says that she sometimes has a little bit of confidence, which lies in being able to "recognize your own weaknesses."

"Recently, I've come to realize that weaknesses can actually be strengths. It can be seen as a form of individuality, yet it also serves as a 'tool' for drawing help from others. Truly and sincerely

recognizing your own shortcomings, it seems to me, often leads to positive outcomes in the end. Facing the kind of weaknesses that might make you sigh without concealing or glossing over them—isn't that the greatest kindness you can show yourself?

"Accept yourself; connect with others; turn your weaknesses into a resource.

"I was empty all along, but perhaps my strength was found in the actions I took to repeatedly fill that void. If, right now, you are feeling unsure of yourself, first allow yourself to look at your 'emptiness,' because that direct gaze is, in itself, the solution. **Your weaknesses are not something that will hurt you—I truly believe they can become an opportunity to connect with others.**"



Interviewer profile

**Chikako Yoshioka**

Joined JICA Tohoku in 2020 after working in the private sector and at a university. She now supports corporate overseas expansion as well as projects related to accepting foreign talent and promoting multicultural coexistence. She took on this interview through a connection from her university teaching days, when she featured Michiko's business model in her lectures.

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From the interviewer

"Michiko kindly assisted with my lectures during my university teaching days. Her message—that one's 'emptiness' (weakness) is a tool for borrowing others' strength—particularly stayed with me. Whenever I recall it, my shoulders relax, and I feel a gentle warmth."



JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 2

# I did what I had to do today.

A mother's small hope,  
found in her deaf son



### **Ueamporn Saengsuwon**

Born in Samut Sakhon Province, Thailand. Mother of two children. Graduated from Silpakorn University with a degree in Literature. After being diagnosed with lymphoma, she obtained a certification as a Functional Nutritional Therapy Practitioner (FNTP) and now works to educate people about the importance of nutrition, offering personalized programs tailored to individual needs. She has recently worked as a full-time nutritional therapist at RAKxa Integrative Wellness.

## **"I just keep doing what I can do."**

These quiet words of Ueamporn Saengsuwon (known as Pu) carry an unwavering strength.

After graduating from university with a degree in Literature, she worked as a writer and editor, but becoming a mother was a turning point in her life. She accepted her son's disability and has lived each day with a positive attitude.

The source of Pu's strength lies in her belief in "living in the present moment." Since her youth, she has practiced Buddhist meditation, focusing her awareness on her breath during difficult times. Even when she became a mother or was diagnosed with cancer, she simply repeated "breathe in, breathe out," and took one step forward at a time. Her positive attitude toward life is deeply rooted in her entire life, as she describes it as "dying at night and being reborn in the morning."

## **Becoming a mother was a turning point in her life**

Pu is from Samut Sakhon Province, Thailand. She studied literature at Silpakorn University and worked as a novelist after graduation. She won awards as a young writer and later became the editor-in-chief of a health magazine. However, more than her career, her journey as a mother has had a much deeper and longer impact on her life.

She has two children, but her eldest son has a hearing

impairment. It all began more than 30 years ago.

"When I was three months pregnant, I contracted rubella. I was in my early 20s at the time. The doctor told me repeatedly that there were risks and that I should give up the pregnancy. But I was young and very sensitive, and I was still emotionally immature, so I couldn't give up. Even knowing the risks, I chose to have the baby.

"As a result, my son was born with almost no hearing. His hearing was very low, and he was classified as severely or profoundly deaf. From infancy, my son showed little reaction to loud noises like thunder or the sound of a door slamming shut. I suspected he might be deaf, but before a diagnosis could be made, he contracted another illness. It was a type of autoimmune disease called nephrotic syndrome. This autoimmune disease is extremely severe for infants. The doctors told me there was no hope for his survival.

"Standing before my crying son, I had no idea what to do as a mother. I was just so sad, but I wanted to help him. That was the only thing I felt strongly about. During his hospitalization, other children with the same disease passed away, but my son kept fighting to live. **There was an incredibly strong 'will to live' within him. I truly felt how strong his will to live was.** Seeing his miraculous recovery, I wanted to respond to that strength."

## Nurturing the voice of the voiceless

After he was discharged from the hospital, she began facing the reality of her son's hearing impairment. At that time, there was a severe shortage of speech therapists in Thailand, and he could only receive 30 minutes of training at the hospital each month. 'Then I'll have to do it myself,' she decided, and began her own training at home.

"We started with practicing the vowel sound 'ah.' I listened carefully to the faint sounds my child made, repeatedly checking the movements of his mouth, tongue, and throat. Of course, I wasn't an expert, but I had no choice but to do it myself. When he wanted milk, I encouraged him to pronounce a—more or less—proper sound. As we continued the speaking exercises, I began teaching him that sounds have meaning.

"For example, while pointing to pictures, I taught him that 'Māa' means 'dog,' 'Mi' means 'bear,' and 'Mó' means 'pig.' In this way, I persistently continued training to link words and their meanings using pictures. The knowledge of phonetics and vocal techniques I learned in the literature department proved invaluable.

"When I was a student, I wondered why I had to study Thai pronunciation. But now I understand. It was all for this purpose. Slowly, little by little, but surely, my son acquired language. He may not be clear, but he can communicate. He can have conversations. We can now connect with each other's hearts. Many people around



## **Connecting to the world through writing— a deaf son's challenge**

In Thailand, many deaf people do not have sufficient opportunities to learn to read and write Thai. Even after graduating from college or vocational school, many find it difficult to communicate without sign language; the deaf insist it is their mother language, though. In Pu's view, a mother's view, as long as spoken and written language remains the mainstream form of communication in society, this "language barrier" will continue to have a significant impact on their employment and social participation.

In this situation, Pu's son has developed the ability to connect with the world through writing.

"I taught my son both how to directly speak and indirectly read Thai at the same time. Although he cannot hear, he was able to connect the written words with their meanings and understand them. Since he cannot hear, he cannot understand what others are saying through sound. However, he can decipher complex situations through written words and context, so he was able to chat with his younger sister and play. That's why I decided to send him to a regular school.

"He attended the same schools as other children from kindergarten through university. He studied alongside hearing children throughout his education. At university, he majored in Thai. After graduation, he started working in a department where he primarily handled administrative tasks, such as passing documents

from one department to another—essentially a messenger role. However, a turning point came one day."

One of his superiors asked him to do some editing work. Pu says this was a very significant moment.

"Many people with hearing impairments have difficulty reading and writing Thai or constructing complex sentences. However, my son can write. That is actually a very big deal. In Thai society, there are still very few opportunities for deaf people to demonstrate their abilities through writing.

"My son is currently pursuing a master's degree in museum studies and is enjoying learning about his favorite subject: history. He is passionate about his studies and even remembers the family trees of the royal family."

## **As a single mother and a cancer patient**

Despite her worries at times, Pu enjoyed raising her children with all her heart. However, she also had moments of loneliness and hardship. Twenty years ago, when her children were in elementary school, she decided to separate from her husband.

"I believe that married couples should grow together. However, in my marriage, after 10 years, we did not grow in the same way or in the same direction. We were supposed to be holding hands, but before we knew it, we had drifted apart . . . That's how it felt. The

people around me said, 'You can't raise two children on your own after a divorce.' But I thought to myself, '**No one can live my life for me.**' **So I had no choice but to decide everything for myself.**

"My daughter and son remain irreplaceable to us. Although we chose to go our separate ways as a couple, we continued to share the responsibilities of raising our children and to pass on our values to them: 'Your mom and dad may not love each other anymore, but we still love you more than anything in the world.'"

And then, more difficulties struck her. After the divorce, Pu herself was diagnosed with cancer.

"I was diagnosed with lymphoma a couple of years after I started my life as a single mother. At that time, I think many people thought that if they were diagnosed with cancer, they would die soon. I felt constantly exhausted, and even breathing was difficult. Every time I breathed, it felt as if it might be my last.

"But my son and daughter were still young. I was terrified of what would happen to my children if I died. There were moments when I felt weak and thought, "*Am I going to die?*" But I pushed myself to think, "*What would happen if I died now?*" I decided to do anything I could. At that time, even going to work felt like a long distance from the parking lot to the office. I would take a breath, exhale, and take one step at a time. I would walk a little, stop, and adjust my breathing. . . . That was all I could do. Even if it took 15 minutes to walk a distance that normally took two to three minutes, I just kept moving forward. Walking itself was like meditation for

me.

"Then, while practicing a diet, I started to take a closer look at my own body. I tried to focus on things that made me feel positive and gave me even a little hope."

Even when faced with difficulties that would normally break someone's spirit, Pu doesn't hold on to bad memories for long.

"I think my brain has limited capacity. So I want to keep only the good memories. If I don't talk about the bad things, they gradually fade away. If I keep thinking about them or talking about them to other people, they will only grow bigger, right? It suits me better to nurture only happy memories."

## **I just kept going**

"To be honest, I don't really know if my life has been difficult." Pu doesn't talk about the past as something painful. She simply says, "I did what I had to do. That's all," and smiles gently.

"When I was diagnosed with cancer, I was forced to focus on my breathing and had no time to think about the future. I couldn't even make plans for the next week. So I stopped expecting anything from the future. **I decided to just do what I could do that day. Once I realized that was enough, I felt much better.**

"Even in such circumstances, what I cherish most is hope and love. And continuing to do what I must do. Because each of us is

born into this world in a different form. I accept that as it is, do what I must do, and live my life. I don't know if that's what you call success. But every day, I just do what I must do. That's all.

"I think the values I learned at home when I was little have influenced my attitude.

"I grew up in a family that didn't care much about what other people thought. I don't mean they were completely indifferent, but my parents always told me, 'Be yourself. You can make your own way in life.'"

**And then, her experience with cancer changed her way of life.**

"When I was diagnosed with cancer, I wanted to recover not only with medication but also through diet. As I became more conscious of my nutritional status, I realized that changing what I eat can change my life. That's why I decided to get certified in functional nutrition therapy. I felt that simply providing information wasn't enough. I wanted to work closely with each person and recommend a diet that was right for them. Now, I've quit my editing job and work as a freelance nutritional therapist. Some of my clients have experienced cancer or other major challenges. Helping them is my role, so I don't talk much about myself. I think it's more important for them to share their own stories. All I can do is listen."

## **Just remember the good things**

What Pu values most in her daily life is **"remembering even the smallest good things."**

"You can forget the bad memories. 'Something good happens every day'—that's my motto.

"Even when I was battling cancer, I faced my health and life head-on, studied nutrition, and made it my work, using it as a foundation for my life. When I could only eat certain foods due to my illness and meals became completely unappealing, I was very sad. But because of that experience, I now understand the importance of food better than anyone else. That's why I now work as a nutritional therapist, providing personalized dietary guidance to help people improve their lives.

"If you feel down, you waste time. After all, time is the only thing that is given equally to everyone."

## **Small goals open up the future**

The "goals" that Pu talks about are not distant ones, such as 10 or 20 years from now. She says, "It's enough to think about how you want to spend this week."

"Setting overly ambitious goals can be exhausting, but continuing to do small things is something we can all do. For me, continuing is the most powerful thing I can do.

"The day my son started talking, the day I found my cancerous and enlarged lymph node had turned to its normal size after changing diet for several months without any medical treatment. . . . All of these were the results of small steps taken over time. And they were all the result of doing what I had to do every day.

"I try not to think about things that make me feel down. If I, as a mother, am depressed, my children will be depressed too. That's why I want to focus on positive things and be a positive person."

For Pu, a single mother and cancer survivor, how she perceives life is very important. As she sorted through the things around her and reaffirmed who she was, she realized that what she needed in life were "simple things."

"People are born alone and live with their own challenges. So, there's no need to compare ourselves to others. What I really need is food, a place to live, clothes, medicine, and my mother and children. I don't need to worry about what other people think of me anymore.

"What matters is that I am alive and breathing right now. Other people's evaluations may be 'success' to someone else, but to me, it doesn't matter much. For me, it's enough to feel that 'I did what I had to do today.' Every day is a challenge in life. But you don't have to aim for a big goal. Just do what you need to do today and get through this week. That's enough. Before you know it, you may find yourself in a place you never imagined."

**It's not about "success,"  
it's about "doing what you have to do."**

"Everyone has their struggles in life. No one is perfect. But no matter what situation you find yourself in, if you are conscious of how you use your time and keep going, even if it's just a little bit,

you will definitely move forward."

Pu's words carry weight as a mother, a woman, and a human being.

"When I was diagnosed with cancer, I wrote in my diary every night. At the time, just getting through each day was all I could manage, so I thought, 'This might be my last day.' That's why I always wrote, 'Goodbye,' at the end of each entry. But when I woke up the next morning, I thought, *'I'm still alive. Thank you for this life.'* Dying at night and being reborn in the morning. Thinking that way, I feel that just doing what I need to do each day is enough. When I feel down, I always tell myself, **'Breathe in, breathe out. If you can do that, today will be okay.'** That's all it takes to look forward again."



Interviewer profile

**Narada Taksirisap**

Graduated from Thammasat University, Faculty of Political Science, Department of International Relations.

**Awatif Lasusama**

Graduated from Mae Fah Luang University, Faculty of Social Innovation, Department of International Development.

Both participated in the 2024 JICA Internship Program and conducted this interview.

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From the interviewer

"We were deeply moved by her journey—from an award-winning short story writer and magazine editor to a nutritionist while simultaneously raising a deaf child. Her perseverance in facing challenges truly inspired us."



JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 3

# Connecting Honduras and Ehime through coffee

A journey of overcoming  
repeated hardships



**Eri Imai**

Born in 1990. Starting in 2013, she spent two years as a JOCV under JICA in Honduras, Central America. Considering ways to support the people she met in Honduras, after returning home, she opened Catracha Coffee Roasters in Ehime Prefecture to sell the coffee beans that they cultivated. She is actively involved in planning various events.

Catracha Coffee Roasters is located on the coast in Futami-cho, Iyo City in Ehime Prefecture. Shop owner Eri Imai visits Honduras in Central America herself, sourcing coffee beans directly from coffee producers, and roasting and extracting these beans herself.

Each cup of coffee reflects the passion of its producers and the many turning points that brought it to life. From her dream of becoming a teacher as a student, to her time as a JICA Volunteer (JOCV), to illness and unexpected challenges: Eri's journey has been filled with twists and turns.

Still, Eri continued to move forward, guided by human connection and a glimmer of hope—ultimately discovering a new way of life through coffee in Honduras.

## **Children and coffee— a future path shaped by two encounters**

Eri decided to become a teacher when she was in high school. Amid her aspirations of studying to become a teacher at Ehime University's Faculty of Education in her hometown of Ehime, a major turning point occurred during her teaching practicum.

"I encountered a girl who was struggling while I was overseeing a class during my teaching practicum. I did my best to support her, and her homeroom teacher even told me that her expression had become brighter. Yet for me, I had no confidence that I could truly

understand how that child felt, and **I realized that I lacked the life experience and maturity to truly understand. So, with the thought of broadening my horizons as a human being before interacting with children, I decided to see the world as a JOCV under JICA.**

"Upon graduating from university, I joined JICA as a JOCV, and in 2013, I went to the Republic of Honduras in Central America. I was engaged in on-site education, teaching mathematics to teaching staff and the local children who attend school. Every day was fulfilling, but I also faced a very harsh reality. While I was overjoyed to be praised by students and teachers who said 'Thanks to Eri, learning math has become fun! Thank you!' On the other hand, I saw many children who were not able to attend school. There are street children and even children who, due to issues like family circumstances, have been forced into an environment of child prostitution. I really wanted to extend a hand to help them, too, but there was nothing I could do. It was a frustrating feeling of powerlessness."

Is there any way to support children not just through education, but financially as well? Exploring this question, Eri encountered a cup of coffee that deeply shook her values.

"During my time in Honduras, a Japanese festival was held in an area called Marcala. It was around two hours away by bus and a mountain climb from where I was posted, but my fellow JICA volunteers from my cohort would be participating in teaching Japanese at that festival, so I went to Marcala for the first time to support them. When the festival was over, a fellow volunteer said,

'There's a delicious coffee shop nearby!' and invited me to stop by on our way home. The shop was called 'Aroma Café,' and it was there that the shopkeeper Nancy and I would later become friends. **Until that point, my impression of coffee was that it was a black and bitter drink. But the coffee that I drank there was rich with the flavor of fruit, having a refreshing sourness and the flavor of berries. I was absolutely astonished by the flavor.**"

Having thought coffee only had a bitter flavor, she was surprised as its fruity and vibrant notes expanded across her palate. This surprise and awe quietly planted a seed within her.

## **Progress comes at the edge of giving up**

That encounter with a cup of coffee in Honduras sparked a passion in Eri. After returning to Japan, she decided to dive into the world of coffee.

"What can I do for the people of Honduras?' My answer was to bring delicious coffee to Japan and return the profits to the community, which would allow me to support them financially. I thought, 'In order to import Honduran coffee beans to sell in Japan, I need to have my own shop.

"However, I had zero knowledge about roasting and coffee. Until I discovered how flavorful coffee was at Nancy's shop, I had not particularly liked it, so I hardly ever drank it. Personally, **coffee was a beverage I felt very disconnected from.** To gain that knowledge,

when my two-year assignment period was over and I returned home, knowing I needed to learn about coffee, I went around to many cafés and coffee bean shops in my hometown of Ehime Prefecture. I applied to become an apprentice at about 20 specialty shops within the prefecture, but I was rejected every time. . . . I think it was no surprise that they rejected a stranger who suddenly applied. The challenge was far more daunting and immense than I had ever imagined. Around that time, I happened to meet someone, and they introduced me to a part-time job at a translation company. It was a time when I wasn't making much progress in opening my shop, but the networking skills I learned back then are useful for events at my shop now."

However, she could not attain that crucial "coffee training." In the frustration between dreams and reality, Eri suddenly noticed she had caught, not homesickness, but "Honduras-sickness." Having booked an airline ticket in preparation for returning to Honduras, she was visited by an unexpected turn of events.

"I was asked to give a lecture speaking about my experience in Honduras from a university in Hojo, Matsuyama City. Afterward, I remembered there was a coffee bean shop around there somewhere, so I paid it a visit. I had continued to be rejected by coffee bean shops up until then, so I had really only planned to drink coffee at this shop, but the shopkeeper asked questions like, 'What brought you to this town? What are you doing?' I had no intention of mentioning my assignment in Honduras, or how I wanted to help those people

by selling coffee, but that my plans were not progressing well, yet somehow, I ended up answering. **He said, 'I am interested as well.'**"

## **Continuing to rise beyond constant stumbling**

Meeting the coffee bean shop owner in Hojo became the catalyst for Eri to finally start turning her coffee shop dream into reality.

"I told him that I was going to buy coffee beans in Honduras, and I asked him to try roasting these beans when I got back. Naturally, I chose Nancy's beans—the ones that had left a lasting impression on me. Connecting that coffee bean shop owner in Hojo to Nancy was, at the same time, the first step toward finally starting my own shop."

Finally, there is a sense that things were moving forward. But soon after, trials beyond imagining fell upon her in succession.

"I developed Graves' disease. I could not speak or even stand up. I had trouble breathing due to hyperventilation and was taken to the hospital. After that, when I resigned from my position as an international cooperation officer, I went through an experience that shattered my trust in people, and I ended up parting with almost all of the funds I had saved to open my shop. The future that had finally come felt far away again. Those days were brutal. Then, there was the West Japan Heavy Rain Event of July 2018.

"My mother's hometown in Ozu City of Ehime Prefecture was met by disastrous torrential rains. Since my grandmother lived there,

I felt so sad and frustrated, as if my memories had been swept away by the disaster. *I want to do something* was the thought that prompted me to leave home."

When feeling as though everything was lost, connecting with people restored light.

"To deal with that sadness, hopelessness, and fear, I roused myself to at least go to Ozu and help remove sludge. While I was on my way there by car, I incidentally got a call from the coffee bean shop owner in Hojo. **'If you have time, we should go remove sludge,' he said. What incredible timing!**"



"We headed to a liquor store run by an upperclassman from his high school. For 10 days, while we shoveled mud, I shared about the things that had happened up until then and my thoughts about opening a coffee shop.

"The liquor store owner said, 'I am planning on setting up a new store in a different location. The counter is large and spacious, so how about we open the coffee bean shop at the new store together?' Just when I was about to give up—with no money and nothing to offer—he offered me a place to begin. **It was then that I truly understood how precious human connections are.** Leveraging the help of those I had met, I finally got to have my own shop.

"To open a shop, I needed equipment, including a roasting machine, but I did not have the funds. However, I received financing for the roasting machine from a bank, and whatever more I needed, I received through crowdfunding. At first, I wasn't sure what would happen, but I reached my fundraising goal and opened the store smoothly.

"It may sound negative, but I always had the sense that my presence bothered people. It was a feeling like I was somehow apologizing for being alive. **Even though my self-esteem is really low, I can act for others more than I can for myself; I can work for Honduras.** Somehow, it all came full circle. I felt that people were cheering me on in my efforts for Honduras—and perhaps presumptuously, I accepted that as a kind of encouragement."

She admits she's not good at taking actions for herself, yet somehow, she finds the strength to act for others and offer a helping

hand. She finds strength every time she recalls the people she met in Honduras. That cycle became the origin of Eri and Catracha Coffee Roasters.

## Hope awaits after letting go of preconceptions

Crowdfunding was a success: Catracha Coffee Roasters finally opened. The shop was set up in a corner of the liquor store. With cooperation from those around her, Eri started her long-awaited coffee shop. However, opening the store was not the end goal. To her surprise, the number of visitors grew daily, far beyond expectations. While bearing all the responsibilities of roasting, sales, and customer service, she became physically and mentally exhausted.

"I was allowed to run the shop inside the liquor store, but the number of coffee customers quickly increased. I was grateful; however, work was falling behind schedule. The roasting machine I installed was small, so even when roasting as much as possible, I would run out of beans during the day. Each day was a cycle of roasting and selling, leaving no time for myself.

"Caught up in day-to-day work, while doing machine maintenance, due to my carelessness, I severed a part of my middle finger. I was rather upset, but . . . unable to bear seeing me like that, the liquor store owner said, 'It has been about three years since we opened. How about opening your own store in a bigger place and doing things at your own pace?' he offered. I felt completely stuck, wondering what would happen if I left. **'The ocean suits you,' he told me.**

"At those few words, a memory I had forgotten was resurrected. In high school, I had thought about attending the University of the Ryukyus because I wanted to live by the sea. Back then, I gave up and stayed in my hometown, but in reaction to that, I ended up heading all the way to Honduras. If I liked the ocean that much, why not set up shop next to it? That thought prompted me to start searching for a new location.

"I kept searching for a place for about two months along the seaside of Ozu City, a place of memories where my grandmother lived, but I could not find an ideal property. Until then, I had firmly believed that 'It has to be Ozu City.' But I thought that maybe that preconception was narrowing my field of view, **so I decided to let go of all my preferences and attachments.**"

After gradually breaking free from the constraints of having to be in Ozu and stay within budget, hope dawned suddenly.

"Up to that point, since no tenants had been found for properties that I did not visit that were over my budget, I was advised to go and take a look, and to try negotiating during the viewing. That is how I came across what is now the current Catracha Coffee Roasters, located along Futami-cho's coastal road in Iyo City, neighboring Ozu City.

"The moment I entered the building, I understood that it had been cherished very much; not merely a building, but like being in the middle of nature. . . . A log house, with the warmth of wood. I felt a strange comfort, as though the space itself seemed to be breathing.

"I felt the building was 'alive,' so I didn't see the rent as a mere expense, but more like a salary—personnel costs for a partner working alongside me. The building itself did its part; the location was one of a kind, and there was plenty of space to enjoy total freedom. The timing, the atmosphere . . . Everything just felt right. Until then, things hadn't gone smoothly—I had even lost 5 kg from the stress. But finding a place where I could be myself made up for all that."

## **Stories that begin in a cup can become music, and cross borders**

Having found a new base, Eri began moving forward at her own pace. The store not only serves coffee, but also thoughtfully shares the stories behind the beans and ingredients it uses.

"Since moving to the new store, we sell chocolate made from Honduran cacao beans and desserts made from local produce in addition to coffee. We strive to share the stories of those who produce each ingredient, just as we do with our coffee beans. We also sell an ice cream brûlée made from pawpaw fruit, domestically grown in Ozu City's Nagahama-cho, in addition to products from a tomato farm that is striving to produce organically processed products. We want to bring the sentiments of the producers to our customers."

Eri's desire is consistent: to **"fully convey the efforts and**

**passions of people that might otherwise go unnoticed."** This has spread not only in the form of agricultural products, but also to live performances.

"I have always loved the musician Saho Terao. Many of her songs speak to people who feel vulnerable, and I relate to that. One day, I heard from a customer that Saho Terao was giving a live performance, and I rushed to see her in Imabari. It was so moving to hear her voice live that, without realizing it, I started crying. I was sure that many people like me needed to hear Saho's songs, so I planned live performances, hoping that many would be able to listen. I held them in my hometown of Matsuyama and at Catracha. From the warmth of those performances, thoughts of the people of Honduras began to blossom. I wanted to bring hope to Honduras through Saho's songs; I couldn't help but say, 'We should make it happen in Honduras!' At first, those around me thought that I was joking. It's not very realistic, right? But among them, Saho was the only one with a serious look in her eyes."

Believing in those eyes with a serious look in them, Eri started moving again.

"A senior JOCV from JICA was a former member of a music troupe that had performed at Honduras' Manuel Bonilla National Theater, so I consulted them about my idea of Saho Terao's performance. He said, 'I want to help.' Thanks to his support, we proceeded with building bridges with the local national wind orchestra there, and our

ideas gradually took shape into reality. To make this happen, we're preparing a crowdfunding campaign to cover travel and local activity costs. Right now, I am dreaming of the moment when I can deliver Saho Terao's voice to the people of Honduras."

## **A place where hope is found through connection in a weary world**

Eri's aim was not just a place to sell coffee—it **was about creating a place where someone's thoughts could be conveyed, and where someone could feel at ease.** As climate change continues around the world, producers are exhausted financially and mentally. Even at the farms in Honduras where Eri purchases beans, some workers have begun to leave.

"Climate change is a tough thing around the world. Prices are also rising, and producers are being worn down both financially and mentally. Some of my own contractors have even given up coffee cultivation.

"The educational field is also facing challenges—Nancy, who was the origin of everything, has requested support for schools that are struggling to operate effectively. I want to do something, but school funding is not something that I can manage. However, what one person cannot do alone can likely be made a reality when the power of many people is combined. That is why I am reminded, once again, about how important relationships and human connection are."

Eri's thoughts are shared by local Ehime farmers and producers. The store also hosted a live performance for them.

"Accompanied by Saho Terao's singing, it was a pleasant time spent connecting with producers and coffee drinkers over coffee and food. I was very happy that it brought everyone great joy.

"The summer of 2024 was so hot that no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't increase their agricultural harvest, so I think that this event helped them to relax. Everyone was able to share something more meaningful beyond money."

What was found was quiet empathy and a sense of relief—as if the weight on their shoulders had been lifted. Sometimes, people visit the store seeking a place of refuge.

Back then, Eri couldn't speak up, stand on her own, or rely on anyone. Even so, supported by the hands that were extended to her, she was able to keep moving forward, little by little. That is why she hopes to send her thoughts to anyone who is suffering:

"Ultimately, I think that you yourself have to overcome those hardships and those sufferings. Those are challenges given to you, and you can be saved through facing them yourself. There are, of course, times of having the urge to run away, or times of wanting to look away from the pain, but even so, **the most important thing is 'continuing to live.'** It is important to believe that even if it is not here and now, you can find a place to belong.

"To keep living, stepping away—even if just for a while—can be

a way of confronting life. I believe that if you continue finding a place of belonging different from where you are now, by continuing to endure, someday the time of overcoming will arrive. If school is difficult, your place of belonging might be outside of school. If you come to Catracha Coffee Roasters, I will brew you some coffee. **People do not live alone; rather, they live within various relationships and human connections. Because of that, I believe that someday, when the timing aligns, there will be a moment when you can take action.**"



Interviewer profile

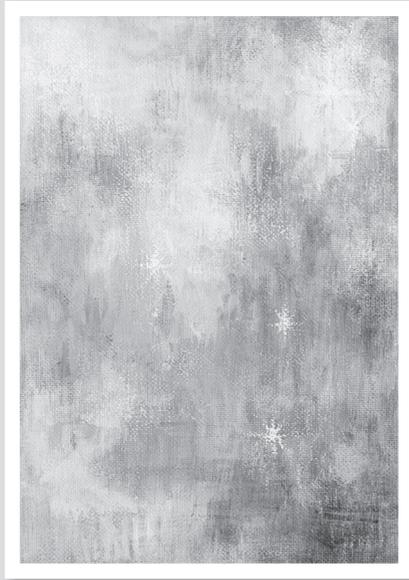
**Tami Utsunomiya**

As a JICA Shikoku Advisor, she supports returning volunteers by providing career path and community engagement activities. As a freelance announcer, she also plans and hosts radio programs highlighting the achievements of JICA volunteers. She has known Eri since her time working at the JICA Ehime Desk, where she served as an advisor.

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From the interviewer

"Eri is a person who follows her heart. Her energy for realizing her aspirations is remarkable, and because she acts with a pure, altruistic spirit, many people are drawn to her and want to support her. Listening to the path Eri has walked, the classical Chinese phrase 'Heaven's timing, Earth's advantage, and human harmony'—often cited as the three conditions for success—came to mind."



JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 4

# Giving a voice to the voiceless

A South Sudanese journalist's story



### **Leila Osman Khamis**

Born in 1982, Leila Osman Khamis joined the South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation (SSBC) in 2008. She produces documentaries alongside her work as a news journalist. Her documentary proposal, *INTO THE LIGHT*, centered on a blind musician, received the Outstanding Proposal Award in the Proposal Pitch category at the Japan Prize, an international competition organized by NHK. This documentary was broadcast in September 2025 in South Sudan.

Africa's youngest nation, the Republic of South Sudan, has long grappled with many difficulties, including a long-standing civil war, political instability, economic stagnation, and a harsh reality for women.

Amid these challenges, Leila Osman, a journalist from the South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation (SSBC), has devoted her life to "telling stories." Despite salary delays, she continues filming documentaries under the scorching sun.

Her words become sparks of hope at times, quietly lighting the hearts of her contemporaries.

## **The path to dreams was always a detour**

The Republic of South Sudan, which gained independence from Sudan in 2011, is Africa's newest country. However, the history of its independence cannot be told solely through joy. Political conflict soon deepened, and in 2013 civil war broke out again. Nearly 4 million people became refugees or internally displaced, and essential public functions such as education, healthcare, and media were significantly restricted.

At the nation's only public broadcaster, Leila Osman continued to shine a light on social issues.

Reflecting on her life's most difficult moments, she remembers a period of uncertainty about where her career was headed. Her father passed away when she was young, and she spent her girlhood living

with her mother and siblings. During the civil war in her homeland, South Sudan, her home base shifted to Kampala, the capital of neighboring Uganda. Her older sister supported the household while also traveling between Kampala and Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, to procure supplies.

"I somehow managed to graduate from high school, but advancing to university after that was tough. I could not pay for the school tuition at all. My mother had no income, and my older sister, who made a living selling clothes, supported us siblings. I also have a younger brother, and we managed to get by somehow as a family.

"To scrape together living expenses, I started a part-time job in Kampala. I attended classes in the evening from 5 pm to 9 pm and worked at a furniture sales job in the morning until 4 pm. Eighty percent of my income went to paying school tuition. Though I was able to make ends meet every day, living that way slowly wore me down.

"What pushed me forward through those painful days was my uncle's words. He told me, 'Why are you wasting time here? You deserve a bright future.' It was true. His words prompted my older brother to pursue engineering with my sister's support. I, too, wanted to return to my hometown once more to chase my dreams"

So, Leila left Kampala and returned once more to her hometown in South Sudan, where the chaos of civil war lingered. There was no guarantee that her dreams would come true, but she was certain that "nothing could begin unless she returned." She moved forward,

believing in herself, and that was the beginning of her journey.

## **The media as a battlefield**

In 2008, Leila joined the South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation (SSBC). At the time, she had not received any professional training for broadcasting or journalism, but her command of English became a weapon.

"I was able to receive training under a media trainer from South Africa. The training period was short; I was immediately assigned to the field, but the conditions were not easy. The budget was insufficient, and the equipment was inadequate.

"There were times when only one production vehicle was available, leaving some staff without transportation. On another occasion, an interview planned for the shoot day had to be canceled because of the other party's situation. Things not going according to plan were a daily occurrence; I would cover transportation and meal expenses out of pocket each time to ensure I could report the story"

Even under such abnormal circumstances, where staff had to cover production expenses out of their own pockets, Leila worked diligently, thinking that "someone has to share these voices." However, what awaited her was an even harsher reality: her salary was often delayed. Even so, she did not stop working, motivated by her patriotism.

"There were times that I would receive pay, but then, at some point, the payments were delayed . . . There was a year when salaries were delayed for over 11 months. Some supplemented their income with side jobs to make ends meet, while others left altogether. It is unusual to work without pay. But women still work—they work for their families; they work for their children attending school. **No matter what happens, you have to move forward.** The government is also doing its best. With new economic policies being implemented, we hope the situation will improve."

## **"Creativity" for women's livelihood**

In South Sudan, being a woman often means a life of hardship. Even when working, wages remain unstable, and women often bear the burden of household chores, childcare, and education. How can one manage household finances without any income? How can one protect their children's future? Amid a male-dominated society and persistent gender discrimination, Leila did not give up. She explains that, to provide for their families, women must be more creative than men.

"To a mother, every child is equal. Whether a child is male or female, she hopes for the same prosperous future for both. But the reality is that sometimes daughters must give up on further education for financial reasons. That is the 'gender issue' we are facing. "Ironically, women raise their 'beloved boys,' only to face a male-dominated society shaped by those very men once they grow up. I don't believe

a mother can simultaneously protect her children and try to change society without facing internal conflict.

"When we stop and wonder, *What kind of vision are we giving to our children?* the issue of gender inevitably rises to the surface. I hope for a future where opportunities for children's education and fair treatment are evaluated based on the 'abilities they have,' not the 'gender they are born with.'

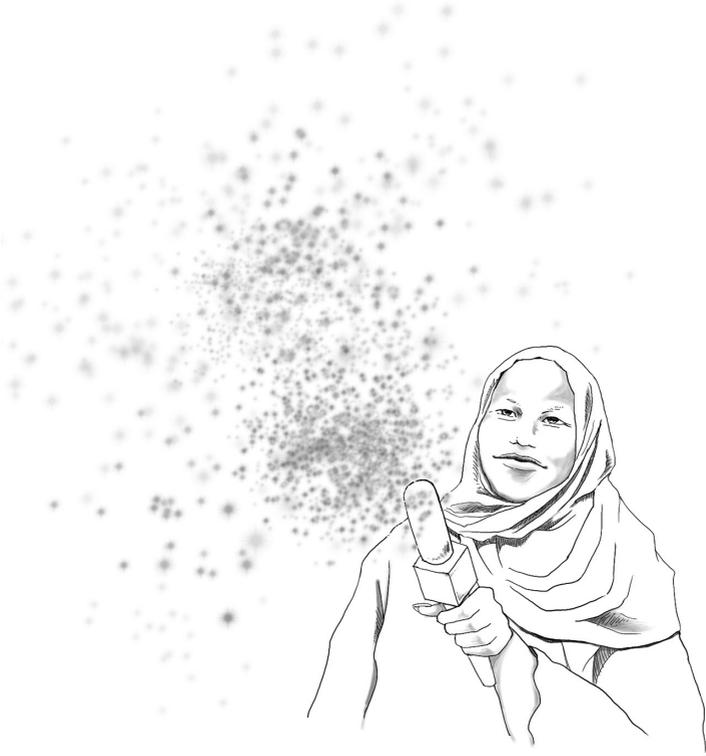
**"I think what women need is not just to be given a chance, but to have sustainable systems in place.** Without that, the next generation will face the same wall. That is precisely why I believe we need the 'creativity' to think flexibly about how things can be improved—so that women don't have to endure any more hardship."

At home and in society, women are constantly confronted with choices: To keep, or to let go? To endure, or to escape? But Leila offers an option beyond these: to create.

## **Perspective from stepping away**

The harsh production environment, the reality of frequent salary delays, and the indifference of South Sudanese citizens toward news coverage—the accumulation of these pressures and stresses gradually wore down Leila's mind and body. Against this backdrop, advice from her older brother became a turning point:

"What if you studied instead of staying in this current situation?"



And so, Leila began studying at Makerere University in neighboring Uganda's Kampala. Her brother helped cover her tuition and dorm fees, and for the first time in ages, she had time that wasn't spent just working to make ends meet.

"Entering the dorms and being disconnected from my previous lifestyle, I finally felt freedom. This was also a freedom to learn, and it became a time to reevaluate myself once more. I majored in Development Studies. Honestly, I thought I wanted to step away from the media; the stress was just too much to handle. Strangely, though, I kept being drawn back to the media over and over. **Perhaps working in the media was God's calling.** At the same time, it's also valuable to explore other opportunities, and when the right time comes, I may choose to pursue other fields."

Her heart was on the verge of breaking; however, she could not abandon the media completely. Perhaps it was the enchanting magnetism of "telling stories." Upon her return to school, the support shown by the SSBC Managing Director also became a source of strength for Leila, as she was granted a leave of absence with full pay.

"I thought that, normally, it would be an unpaid leave of absence. But he told me, 'I believe that you will come back.' That alone gave me an overwhelming sense of peace.

"I was uncertain whether to take a different job or move into another field, yet I had a strange sense that the media was 'calling

me back.' That thought came to me after reuniting with Midori Matsumoto, an expert who had been involved in program production for JICA's Project for Institutional Capacity Development of South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation. I worked with her on this project until 2018. After returning to school, we lost touch for a while, but during the COVID pandemic, she reached out to me, saying, 'Shall we do another project together?' That led to the creation of *The Rise of Base Ball in South Sudan*."

## **What The Rise of Base Ball in South Sudan taught me**

From the perspective gained during her "learning period" and a better sense of how to protect herself, Leila returned once again to the field of program production. The production, *The Rise of Base Ball in South Sudan*, was a major catalyst for her to re-engage with her work with renewed passion. The program followed South Sudan's only baseball team; it carefully portrayed how the children learned discipline, fairness, and cooperation through sports.

"Right after COVID-19, there were absolutely no production funds. There were days when we filmed under the scorching sun from morning until evening, with no water or food. Even when everyone said, 'Come on, let's go home,' I stuck it out, thinking, 'But I have to get this shot today—I probably won't encounter this scene again.

"What we aimed to show was not merely a sports program, but the philosophy of baseball itself, and how deeply it influences children. I

sensed that it would become a good-quality documentary.

"The team was co-ed, with boys helping with housework and girls practicing diligently in uniform, just like the boys. This is a very rare thing for South Sudan. I believe that it was able to convey the growth of these children through activities that transcend gender boundaries and show how they learned to value discipline.

"After the program aired, a remarkable change followed—more girls expressed interest in joining, and parents even said, 'If it's this team, my daughter can join.' Nothing makes me happier than this. We were able to portray role models for girls actively engaging in student life through sports, and we could make a tangible impact on society. I truly felt that this, especially, was my role as a female journalist."

Once she got a feel for this, a colleague of hers posed a question that got to the crux of the issue.

"Why do you try so hard under these impossible circumstances? You could get better pay doing the same work if you worked for a non-governmental organization (NGO).'<sup>1</sup> It was a reasonable argument."

Leila did not answer that question right away because deep within her lay a clear reason that could not be measured by money or compensation. She believed that, unlike the work of an NGO that communicates to an international community, there was "a voice for our people" that could only be delivered from this place. That conviction sustains her actions.

"I always stand on set with the thought that *this day may be the only day I can shoot this* etched in my mind. If I let a scene slip away, there is no guarantee that I will encounter it again—so I continued shooting. Of course, there was no one to support me and no system to give me a break, but precisely because I lived through those days, **I came to realize that success is never a matter of luck. This work taught me that to gain something, you must have the resolve to sacrifice something else.**"

Leila did not stop believing in the power of the media or in herself. Even amid harsh realities, *The Rise of Base Ball in South Sudan* reflected her own unwavering resolve. And that resolve spread tangible ripples of hope throughout South Sudanese society, manifesting as behavioral changes among those who watched the program.

## **A passion for weaving stories**

The starting point for Leila's work was the drive to tell stories—the desire to give a true voice to the voiceless.

**"Telling stories is my way to connect with the world, as well as to prove my existence.** Therefore, I conducted in-depth interviews over time and focused on producing documentaries that capture unspoken voices. While breaking news is, of course, important, I realized this was where my strengths lay."

However, in spite of that strong feeling, before taking her leave of absence, she was often plagued with the anxiety of "Are the things that I want to convey actually reaching viewers?"

The turning point came with a brief five-minute special segment within a news program, focusing on soaring prices caused by the economic crisis. Produced with the assistance of JICA experts, the segment's broadcast was followed by a social media post by a citizen that caught her attention. The post simply read, "Leila Osman is back."

"When I saw that post, it was the first time I felt that my work was actually reaching hearts. During my break, it felt as though my existence had vanished from the world—but when I raised my voice again, someone said, 'She's back.' Those words reignited the fading flame within my heart with new strength."

## **Not quitting becomes hope**

Leila first attempted to enter the Japan Prize, an international competition for educational content organized by NHK, in 2015. After drafting a proposal, however, she ultimately decided not to apply. Yet, there was still a small seed remaining in her heart that thought, *I want to try again someday.*

Eight years later, in 2023, the opportunity returned. Her long-

cherished project about a blind musician, *INTO THE LIGHT*, emerged as a candidate for consideration.

"Initially, I did not think that I could do the application, as the road ahead was truly arduous: preparing project proposals, reviewing the structure, and creating documents in English. I felt my way through everything; it would have been impossible without the support of everyone around me.

"My program was fortunate enough to be selected as one of six finalists from over 400 applications, and I received guidance from an international mentor. However, with days spent receiving harsh feedback and repeatedly revising manuscripts, South Sudan's unstable Internet was a significant barrier. Zoom would not connect; WhatsApp replies were not delivered.

"Amid such adversity, Midori, a program production specialist based in Japan, deliberately adopted a stance that seemed to push me away. When I was told, 'Because it would be unfair to other participants, I won't help you directly,' it honestly stung a little. But now, I well understand that she was trying to nurture me as a professional.

"When I truly believed I wouldn't make it in time, it was my mentor's words that helped me out: **'You are already a winner.' At this comment, the tension in my mind eased, and I finally believed in myself.**

"When my name was announced as the runner-up for the Outstanding Proposal award, I could not stop the tears. I threw myself into my mentor's arms right there and then, crying, "I can't

make sense of anything anymore."

Then came the Japan Prize Awards Ceremony. Her eight years of intangible aspiration finally took tangible form: the trophy was placed in her hands.

## **Making decisions based on personal convictions**

Young women come to consult with Leila from time to time. She offered this advice to a woman who gave up on going to university in order to work and support her sick mother:

"When she confessed to me that, 'I want to be a doctor, but I have to work to care for my family,' I told her, 'If you choose to put your own future on hold just to reassure your family right now, you won't be helping them in any real sense. Develop yourself first; only by fulfilling your dreams will you gain the strength to support your family. If you bear all the pressure alone, you may even forget about your precious dream of becoming a doctor.

"Giving something up for someone else is one thing; being bound by the present and abandoning future possibilities is another. **I believe that living for someone else is really about nurturing yourself.** So, I pushed her by saying, 'Don't let this chance slip away.'"

These were also the words that Leila herself had kept telling herself during difficult times, the days when she worked to pay her school tuition, scrimping on her food expenses to attend university. The fact that she never let reality stop her from pursuing her dreams

gives Leila's words a certain weight.

"Sacrifice, devotion, and conviction. Without these, you cannot begin anything. However, to choose the truly important path, sometimes it takes courage to break free from others' values and make decisions based solely on your own convictions. Letting go of something for a greater goal without getting tangled in short-term trivial matters is not suffering, but an investment in the future.

"People always say whatever they want, but do not be misled by those voices, and do not ever lose sight of your own life. **You alone are responsible for your life.** The people around you and society will likely judge your success, or your lack of success, but these are merely judgments by their own yardsticks; they will not take responsibility for your life. **Be true to yourself and choose your path with confidence—the one you believe is the best for you.** Beyond that point, happiness for you, your family, and society surely awaits."



Interviewer profile

**Midori Matsumoto**

Worked as a TV director producing news and documentary programs. Since 2015, she has participated in JICA's South Sudan Broadcasting Station Organizational Capacity Building Project as a program production specialist.

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From the interviewer

"I saw myself reflected in the female staff members of South Sudan's public broadcaster, who continue producing programs under extremely harsh conditions. As a fellow female journalist, I hope to build a space together with them where we can continue gathering and broadcasting the voices that go unheard."



JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 5

# As a mother, as a mayor

Her chosen path and resolve



**Haruka Kuwabara**

Born in 1986. After graduating from Waseda University, she enrolled in the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Public Policy. While in school, prompted by the 2011 Northern Nagano Prefecture Earthquake, she ran for the Tsunan Town Council election and won for the first time. She took office as the sixth mayor of Tsunan Town in 2018 (currently serving a second term) and is also a member of government bodies such as the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, and the Cabinet Secretariat's meeting for the Headquarters for Creating New Regional Economies and Living Environments.

Living in a local community, engaging with society, and devoting oneself to others through work—each may seem like a simple choice, yet at times they collide, turning into "life's obstacles."

As the mayor of Tsunan Town, Niigata Prefecture, Haruka Kuwabara is someone who has navigated such pivotal crossroads.

While studying at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Public Policy, an earthquake in her hometown was the catalyst for her heading back, leading her to become a town council member in her twenties and, at 31, the youngest town mayor in Japan at the time. Even while struggling to balance work and childcare, as a leader who has been nurturing the future of the region, the message she shares—"Progress over perfection; never give up"—resonates powerfully yet quietly.

## **A mother's wish: "I want to leave this town to my children"**

Tsunan Town in Niigata Prefecture is a small town known as one of Japan's heaviest snowfall areas. Haruka Kuwabara has been responsible for town administration since 2018. Raised on a farm surrounded by mountains and covered in snow in winter, her childhood spent amid this majestic natural landscape still resonates deep within her as a formative memory.

"I was raised in Tsunan Town until after graduating high school. My family harvested a lot of vegetables, and our dining table was always

covered with the many dishes we made using those vegetables. I brought my own bento lunchbox as a junior high school student, and thinking about it now, those lunchboxes truly overflowed with love. At the time, I said that frozen gratin was better [laughs]. But after becoming an adult, I realized how amazing it is to have your family cook such meals every day."

She started university and moved to Tokyo, leaving her hometown for a while. Somewhere in her heart, though, she continued to think, "I want to return someday." What ended up driving her to do so was the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, followed by the Northern Nagano Prefecture Earthquake the next day.

"Tsunan Town was also severely damaged from that earthquake with an observed seismic intensity of lower 6 (magnitude of around 6.6). Fortunately, human casualties were low, but the moment I saw the devastation of my hometown on TV, an overwhelming urge to return and help welled up inside me. Even without the earthquake, I think that I would have returned someday, but I initially thought it would be good to work in Tokyo for a time before returning. But then, the earthquake happened. Unable to sit still, I returned home even though I was in the middle of graduate school. After that, I got married and became a mother of two. My husband, who was also raised on a farm, runs a pig farming business. We were in different grades, but close enough to be like childhood friends. Our family homes were just a stone's throw apart. The only things that changed after marriage were our home and my last name: from 'Kuwahara'

to 'Kuwabara' [laughs].

"Becoming a mother also brought about a change in my mindset. At the time, I was working as a town council member, but before that, I had always thought that I wanted to do work that would improve the town and the region; becoming a parent strengthened that thought. When my children become adults, I want them to inherit this town in good condition. As a result of considering what I should do, or what I should aim for to achieve this, that was when I decided to run for mayor. I realized that being the town mayor—making decisions, drafting budgets, and overseeing implementation—would be truly fulfilling."

## **Days tempered by the snow have shaped who I am today**

Niigata Prefecture's Tsunan Town, where Haruka was born, raised, and is now working hard as mayor to improve the town, is one of the heaviest snowfall areas in Niigata Prefecture. In winter, the ground is covered with snow, and heavy gray clouds spread across the sky. Growing up under such natural conditions, there were moments when it felt suffocating.

"Heavy snowfall in winter can be a blessing in some ways, yet living with it every day is undeniably challenging. When I was young, over half of the year the ground was covered in snow, and sunny days were few. The sky was always gray, and there was a feeling that it was very closed off, both visually and emotionally. One of the

reasons I left the town was to go on to university, but I think I also wanted to escape from those feelings from my childhood as quickly as possible.

"Yet, I believe that there were certainly things that were nurtured by such a harsh environment.

"In elementary school, going to school with other children in the area took 30 minutes in the snow. Though it was difficult, becoming a sixth grader meant taking the lead and pulling everyone along with me. Guiding the younger students safely through the snow naturally nurtured a sense of responsibility in me.

"Doing cross-country skiing, which is unique to snowy regions, also played an important role, I think. It is a sport referred to as a 'winter marathon'; traveling long distances in the snow wearing skis, I feel, gave me tenacity and the strength to overcome difficulties. It was a formative experience that shaped who I am today.

"Of course, this tenacity is not unique to me, but can be said of many of the people who live in this town. Living in tune with nature, there are many times when even agriculture is swayed by the climate, or things do not go well, yet the residents of Tsunan Town possess the underlying strength to calmly and flexibly overcome those circumstances. Even when I observe today's children, whether it be in exams or sports, I sense their determination to persevere without giving up—they do not break easily. Perhaps it is the town's climate that nurtures this."

## "Mother" and "Mayor"

In 2018, Haruka became Japan's youngest mayor when her eldest child was three years old and her youngest was one and a half. From her time working as a council member, she balanced the challenge of family and work, but the weight of those responsibilities increased even more once she became the town's representative.

"The thought often crossed my mind: *Shouldn't I be spending more time with my children?* I thought that many times over. I have struggled with balancing work and motherhood for a long time, **but I firmly believed that showing these children the image of their mother working hard for others would have meaning for them.** My children themselves accept and support me. Whenever I say, 'I am sorry that I cannot make it to tomorrow's event,' they reply, 'It's important, so this is the time to do your best!' Those words saved me many times.

"I was often told by the townspeople that 'Children grow up watching their mothers' example,' so, believing in those words and trying my best, little by little, I began to gain confidence.

"Of course, it is not as though there were no negative voices either. I was told things like, 'What kind of mother does not come to pick up her child?' However, in today's era, it is natural for women to hold leadership positions. Many of the townspeople know or have experienced this. There was understanding from my children's teachers and caretakers, and I was grateful to them for naturally creating a good environment.

"As mayor, I sometimes attend entrance and graduation ceremonies, and when I do, it gives my children a chance to see what their mother does for work—that is a source of strength for me, too."

Nonetheless, it seems that Haruka's husband, who watched over her activities, also had his own struggles.

"I think he felt a bit uncomfortable—maybe even uneasy—with his wife being in the public eye as mayor. I think that, even now, he still has some of those worries, and I do not think he fully agrees with me doing this kind of job.

"My husband and I each have our own path, and we respect each other's choices. Even when our views differ, we share one clear understanding: that we will raise our children together. It is



important that my spouse and I take a stance of supporting each other as a family, without taking sides.

"After all, as someone in the parenting generation, balancing work is an eternal challenge. However, looking back, I realize that I had many role models in Tsunan Town who managed both: women who farmed and raised children, and people who raised their children with the help of grandparents while starting their own shops. I feel I was encouraged by the idea that, 'It takes a village.'

"My father also encouraged me, saying, 'There are many different ways to raise children nowadays.' I realized that I should not be bound by what I 'should do,' and felt that I should just move forward, believing in my own way of doing things."

## **The responsibility and significance of making decisions**

The job of mayor requires many decisions to be made daily. The tenacity and perseverance from growing up in a snowy region are also connected to the ability to make decisions.

"Tsunan Town is a small town with a population of 8,300 people. For that reason alone, a single decision has a significant impact on the entirety of the town. Consequently, I make each decision feeling that incredibly intense pressure. When you spend money on one project, you must put off something else for later, so I always struggle with setting priorities. Knowing that both are necessary is why it is even more difficult to make these decisions. I want to respond to the voices

of all the townspeople, but it's impossible to grant every request. In such situations, I feel I am constantly asked how I will choose or how I will bear the responsibility. I still do not think that I have sufficient experience as a mayor, so there are times when I lose confidence in my own judgment. **Even still, considering what to do now for the future, I have no choice but to decide.**

"For example, investments in the town's agricultural corporations. Things such as benefit distribution and congratulatory cash gifts for elderly residents are, of course, important for maintaining current living standards, but we place greater emphasis on laying the groundwork for the future.

"Amid an aging population among the townspeople, though, how do we cultivate and protect vast farmland? When I considered this, I wanted to nurture capable successors who could properly continue the work, so I invested in agricultural corporations that have been established in recent years. On the other hand, though, that same investment could have been budgeted to be widely distributed among the townspeople. I must often make bold, forward-looking decisions—and at times, adjusting the balance for socio-economic reasons can make them appear counterintuitive. Such decisions naturally carry a tremendous weight of responsibility, so I proceed cautiously while carefully considering each situation to find the best path ahead."

One decision can benefit some, while simultaneously leaving others to fall through the cracks. That is the weight of responsibility in politics, Haruka says.

**"Whenever decisions are made, there are some people who benefit, but there are always others who fall through the cracks.**

Given that I am in a position where I should protect the townspeople as much as possible, I sometimes end up putting myself in a tight spot. However, choosing *this* does not mean I neglect *that*. I make it a priority to do things that cannot be put off—things that, if not done now, will stop things from running smoothly. In that sense, I may not be able to do many of the things that clearly contribute to gaining popularity or bring joy to the townspeople, but for the sake of the greater public interest, **based on my motto of 'a future for the next generation,'** though I am not sure how well this is conveyed to the townspeople, I hope that, in any case, by acting with the future in mind, people will come to understand the results. That would make me happy. Fortunately, I do feel that I'm gradually gaining their trust. It took some years, though."

## **Collaborating, not competing— the future of regional revitalization**

At the core of Haruka's approach to town development are "future-oriented investments." More than having an immediate effect, she values creating systems and cultivating human resources to build a legacy for the next generation.

"As the population continues to age in Tsunan Town, protecting our vast farmland is a big challenge. By supporting agricultural

corporations that nurture young successors, we aim to establish a system to pass on the land to the next generation, but that is not something where you can see an immediate result. While it is important to allocate budgets in ways that directly benefit the townspeople, deliberately investing in the future increases the town's long-term sustainability.

"In Japan's rural areas, each has its own challenges to face; it is a situation where we compete over a limited pool of population and human resources. I hope to shift this dynamic from competition to collaboration.

"If human resources and expertise could be shared more flexibly, both inter-regionally and between cities and surrounding regions in a dynamic of mutual learning and support, I believe we could gradually change from the structure of 'Tokyo-centric concentration,' where new possibilities for regional revitalization could be revealed. **That is because I firmly believe in the inherent value of local regions.** There is a strength in each region distinct from cities, whether it is nature, their sense of proximity to people, or their pace of life. It is precisely in such areas that we can rediscover social value, and I want to make the most of that 'authenticity.'"

One concrete achievement through those efforts is in healthcare.

"Niigata is known as a prefecture for its shortage of doctors, but a ray of hope is beginning to shine here. Young trainee doctors in their twenties, driven by the aspiration to improve healthcare throughout Niigata Prefecture—including its depopulated areas—are gathering

at Tsunan Hospital, using Tsunan Town as their fieldwork base.

"They are not only in charge of providing actual medical care in Tsunan Town, but are also beginning to explore possible ways to make the region sustainable from the broader perspective of medical collaboration across the entire Uonuma region. Amid the challenges of hospital management, a new team centered on these trainee doctors is emerging, uniting the former director, doctors, nurses, administrative staff, and even the junior residents who follow after them. Collaborating with each hospital, they are working together to build a system where the entire region supports one another.

"They work together beyond their positions to shape the future of the region with their own hands. The very emergence of such a team is crucial for regional revitalization, and I feel that people with the same aspiration are gradually emerging throughout Japan as well."

## **To you who is facing a "wall"**

No matter how determinedly one moves forward, there are moments when one wants to stop—when things do not go well, when people don't understand you, when you lose your confidence. When coming up against these "walls," how does Haruka face them?

"That means cultivating a certain 'resilience,' or, rather, not overthinking things. Of course, that is not something that can be done easily, and there are difficult parts to it. . . . I try not to take everything happening around me—or that might happen in the future—too seriously.

"I once came across words by Audrey Hepburn, who served as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador: 'The past, I think, has helped me appreciate the present—and I don't want to spoil any of it by fretting about the future.' These words really helped me. I did not aim to become a politician initially. If I had, I think I would have been operating from the perspective of considering which electoral district to run in, or what strategy to adopt. . . . But I have simply made decisions and acted according to what each moment required. Before I realized it, I found myself in the position of town mayor. Even now, I repeatedly make decisions on a case-by-case basis. **So rather than worrying endlessly about what lies ahead, face the present—embrace it.** I think that by doing so, even with setbacks and failures, you will continue to move forward."

The background for her desire to serve the community stems from a formative childhood experience. Among the influential figures in her life was Sadako Ogata, who served as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

"Tsunan Town, jointly with Tokamachi City, hosted an international art festival called the 'Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale.' When the second iteration of the festival was hosted in 2003, Sadako Ogata was present and gave a speech. At the time, it was my second year of high school, and I went to listen. There, she said, '**Think globally, act locally.**' Personally, I had thought about pursuing something global before then, but I realized that there must be plenty to do right where I live, in my own community. That, I felt, aligned with

my way of life. It is about keeping the big picture in mind while developing strategies based on that vision and implementing them locally—in the very places where people live.

"The 'Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale' continues today and has recently exhibited works by Ukrainian artists. There is an artist whose work was created amid the ongoing ravages of war. Based on their harrowing experience of using their studio temporarily doubling as a shelter, they also now create pieces utilizing hydroelectric power plants. Though they are currently residing in Tsunan Town, they touch on global themes even here at this local town's art festival. I hope that by showing that the world is connected, especially to children, they will look outward rather than inward and think progressively about various things."

So, for those who are currently struggling against these "walls," what words would you like to share with them? When asked this, Haruka chose her words carefully:

"First, face the present moment. **You do not need to decide everything about the future; choose what you can do now, and the roads will eventually meet.**"



Interviewer profile

**Ayumi Yuasa**

Engaged in promoting gender equality at JICA, OECD, and the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office. Her motto is "Sanritsu" (three pillars)—balancing "work," "childcare," and "hobbies." She also holds a world No. 1 ranking in her sport.

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From the interviewer

"Haruka's words deeply encouraged me—that in a positive sense, it's about a kind of 'resiliency,' the ability not to overthink things, and rather than worrying about the future, to cherish this very moment."



JICA Hikari Project

# Chapter 6

## Surviving the flames of war, keeping hope alive

The life of a teacher  
in Bosnia and Herzegovina



**Smilja Todorović Mrđa**

Born in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which comprises present-day Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. Studied history at the University of Sarajevo. After the Bosnian War, she worked for many years in peace education at an elementary school, teaching social science subjects such as civic education (CIVITAS), environmental studies, and history. She continues to collaborate with teachers from the former Yugoslavia and around the world through activities such as writing various textbooks and giving lectures, actively pursuing educational initiatives in multiple areas.

**"People try to plan for the future, but life sometimes has other plans and guides us beyond our own will."**

Smilja Todorović Mrđa's life deeply embodies these words.

Growing up in Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where family labor took absolute priority, she pursued the light of hope: continuing her education in the city. Just as she became convinced that teaching was her life's calling, her beloved country was engulfed in conflict.

Having survived the unprecedented tragedy of the Siege of Sarajevo, she continued teaching peace to children scarred by war. Her life shows us, living in the modern world, the true form of the strength to never give up hope needed to overcome hardship.

## **School as a "place of joy" — poverty fostered a thirst for learning**

Smilja was born in Sanski Most, a picturesque Bosnian-Herzegovinian village where three rivers are spanned by charming bridges, evoking a fairy-tale atmosphere. Yet the environment she grew up in was far from fairy-tale-like.

"My family lived in a neighboring village about 7 kilometers from town, and I walked that distance to school every day. I had two brothers and one sister. My parents couldn't afford textbooks,

notebooks, or clothes. So, unless the snow was deep, we often walked to save on transportation costs."

Helping with the family farm took priority over schoolwork. In that environment, school was a beacon of light and hope for her.

"We had vast land that we had to cultivate ourselves. My day started at 6 a.m., sometimes even earlier. Naturally, work to survive took priority over studies. That's precisely why school was my only 'place of joy.' My mind, hungry for knowledge, was always craving something new, meeting friends, and interacting with various people in that school setting. I was a top student at school and secretly dreamed of studying in a big city. I didn't know my specific calling, but I always wanted a job working with children."

To fulfill that dream, Smilja resolved to go to university.

"After completing my fourth year of high school, my uncle in Sarajevo invited me to apply to the Department of History at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, and I was accepted. But honestly, I didn't expect it. I couldn't imagine my parents would allow me to study in a big city, so I desperately persuaded them, saying, 'I'll work and not be a burden,' and somehow got permission to go to university. Luckily, I found a part-time job just three days after starting. Over four years of university, I worked at a total of 26 different companies. **I believe it was precisely this experience that nurtured the true 'strength to survive' needed to endure the**

**unimaginable times that would come later."**

## **"Fire" and "Fear" — a life and mission bestowed amidst war**

After graduating, she struggled to find work in her field of history. Following her marriage to her lifelong partner, she accepted a short-term teaching position at a school in Sarajevo. Just as she became convinced that "this is my true calling," the ominous shadow of war began creeping across all of Yugoslavia.

"My eldest son was born on October 9, 1991. It was not long after my father passed away suddenly at the young age of 52. My husband wanted to name him 'Milan' (peace). But I suggested, 'If it's peaceful when he's born, let's name him Milan (peace). If the conflict continues, let's name him Ognjen (fire).' The result was . . . well, as you can guess."

Far from stopping, the conflict only escalated, culminating in the siege of Sarajevo. The family was trapped in Sarajevo, right on the front lines, under a hellish siege that lasted nearly four years.

"We lived in the Dobrinja district. It was used as the athletes' village during the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics. That district, once a place of lodging, became one of the most devastated areas in the country during the war. The city was completely besieged. Citizens weren't allowed to leave; the only times anyone could exit were for

The series of conflicts that occurred during the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are collectively known as the Yugoslav Wars, with major fighting persisting from 1991 to 2001. Amidst the federal dissolution triggered by the outbreak of conflict in 1991, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence in March 1992. At that time, the country had a population of approximately 4.3 million, comprising a mix of Bosniaks (Muslims), Serbs, and Croats. While many Muslim and Croat residents supported independence, many Serbs opposed it.

hospital transport or death. When my mother-in-law passed away within Sarajevo itself, only my husband, who managed to obtain a special pass, was able to attend the funeral.

"For the first year after the siege began, we lived in a basement that had become a shelter, alongside family and neighbors. Our home was just one floor above us, yet we couldn't return. Aid supplies never reached us. Literally, death was our constant companion every day. Days without water or electricity, parting with loved ones, unable to contact family, relatives, or friends . . . I still don't know how we endured it. I think it was our optimistic spirit — clinging on to the hope that "surely, it will end tomorrow" — that sustained us."

**Amidst such wartime chaos, her second son was born.**

"Our second son was born in 1994. His name was 'Bojan,' which comes from the word for 'fear.' When my husband went to the government office to receive rations for the newborn, the official told him, 'We can't distribute milk without a name.' Unable to return empty-handed, my husband immediately replied, 'Then we'll name him Bojan.'

"I never made it to a single prenatal checkup during my pregnancy and gained only 5kg. In the damp, dimly lit basement overflowing with refugees, no one even noticed I was pregnant. That he was born safely at all, under such extraordinary circumstances, was a surprise to all of us. Imagine my mother's shock when she finally saw me two years after the ceasefire, having lost all contact, and learned two grandchildren had been born during the conflict. Writing just about

my pregnancy under these conditions could fill a whole book.

**"The war took everything, leaving us only with fear.** Every time we went outside, every time we played, our lives were constantly in danger. During the Siege of Sarajevo, over 1,601 young lives were lost, and thousands more children were injured."

## **The basement as a "front line" and the classroom of hope**

Mortar shells exploded right near her home. For over a year after that, she couldn't even enter her own house.

"Aid supplies weren't reaching us, and we faced severe food shortages. At night, we'd leave the basement and, moving along the balcony, receive a few bags of powdered milk and clothes from neighbors. Every day, we'd just listen to the shelling and count the number of explosions. Some nights, the explosions exceeded a thousand. Even though our home was on the first floor, it was too dangerous to set foot inside for a year. The one time I did go in, I was targeted by a sniper. . . . The bullet scar near my right ear is still a part of me.

"When the besieging army finally withdrew from the hills surrounding our area, we could leave the basement. In the sunlight, we were all pale and emaciated, barely recognizable to each other. My son Ognjen was so small and frail that looking at him filled me with fear. For his first birthday, neighbors gave us a small wood stove and a stump. It wasn't an ideal birthday, **but simply being**

**alive was a miracle."**

Even after returning home, her husband served as a volunteer in the multi-ethnic Bosnian Army. However, the ethnic group that dominated the region at the time differed from that of Smilja's family. Consequently, they sometimes faced distrust and difficulties from neighbors and the local community. Yet, over time, that distrust faded. Trust was rebuilt with neighbors of different ethnicities, and they found strength in sharing memories of the past. Amidst this, the most terrifying moment of her life arrived.

"The most gut-wrenching event of those four years was searching for my husband inside a bus that had been shelled. I desperately searched for him inside the bus, which had become a sea of blood. But I couldn't find him. Then a neighbor rushed over and told me he hadn't been on the bus at all—that he was safe. The reason he wasn't on the bus was simply that a friend had invited him out for a beer that day. He hadn't touched a drop of beer since the conflict began. That one beer kept him away from that doomed bus. If that isn't fate, then I don't know what is."

Even in that desperate situation, she continued fulfilling her duty as a mother and a teacher. For the children who survived, she turned the basement, where the sound of shells echoed, into a "classroom."

"The basement was the only safe place to play, and later, an improvised classroom we called the 'Hallway School' was set up.

When the shelling started, the streets and parks emptied, and the shelters filled to capacity. During those long hours, I studied, played, and shared stories with the neighborhood children in the basement, which helped us to forget the harsh reality, even if only for a moment. That time gave us a sense of normalcy and nurtured the hope that peace would come someday. **That was our small 'front line'—a resistance to war without guns.** That time sustained my spirit and strengthened my belief that miracles could happen."

## **A mission in peace education for wounded children**

In December 1995, the Bosnian War ended, and peace finally arrived. Yet the challenge of peace may have only just begun.

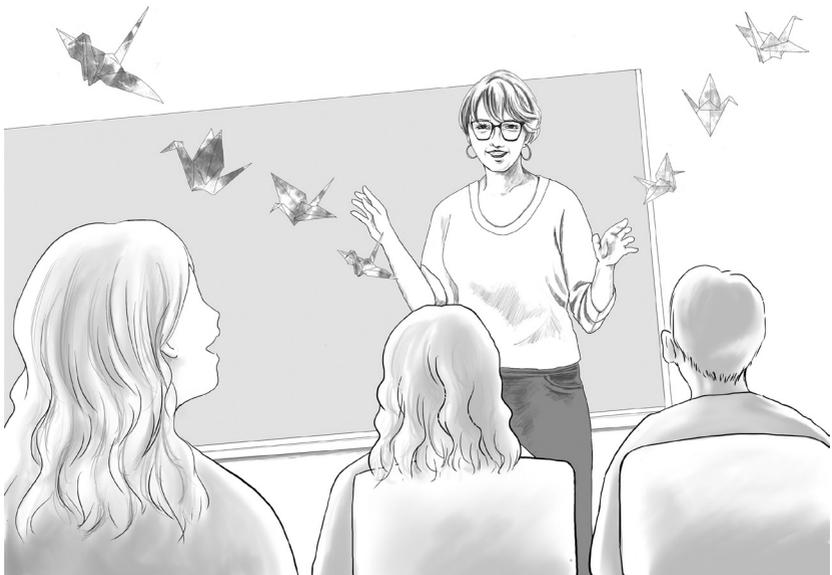
**"Surviving war is difficult. But living in peace is even harder."**

With these words, Smilja began teaching her specialty—history—at Osman Nuri Hadžić Elementary School. The school sits on the boundary line dividing the two entities: the Federation (home to many Muslims and Croats) and Republika Srpska (home to many Serbs). There, she encountered students who had lost family members and carried deep psychological trauma.

"Teaching history, especially modern warfare, in a place where memories of war still linger, is truly difficult. Some students lost parents or witnessed the deaths of loved ones. What should I tell

them? Peace, tolerance, love for others. . . ? Or should I speak about their lost childhoods, stolen by conflict? I couldn't answer that question immediately. I had no choice but to keep learning and growing myself, preparing to be able to respond to them. **Sometimes, love alone isn't enough. I needed the 'skills' to truly connect with their souls.**

"My experience in Japan became a major turning point for me. I participated in JICA's 'Building a Network for Education for Peace' course in Hiroshima for a month alongside teachers from various regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was one of the most valuable experiences I've ever had, and it profoundly changed my outlook on life. I was able to learn firsthand how Japan has pursued



'peacebuilding' to realize a sustainable society free from war and violence."

After returning home, she applied the insights gained in Hiroshima, dedicating herself to various peace education projects like developing teaching materials and creating comics. Together with colleagues, she built a network spanning approximately 120 schools nationwide to promote peace education.

"To convey peace to students and the younger generation, I also actively introduced Japanese culture that values peace. We made Japanese cuisine, did origami, and calligraphy. We frequently held events called 'Japan Days' at schools. It was truly an honor to receive the Global Teacher Prize in India in 2022, in recognition of my years of work. But what brings me the greatest joy is still the days spent in the classroom and the time spent with each child individually. My heart swells every time I meet former students who have become successful young adults. And above all, the health and success of my two sons, now educated and grown into fine young men, are my greatest pride."

## **A heart unafraid, forged by trials**

Life continues even after the glorious event of winning the Global Teacher Prize. The recent deaths of her husband and niece brought deep sorrow to Smilja once more. Yet she chooses not to pause.

"There were truly heartbreaking events, such as losing beloved family members. But I just pause a little, take a deep breath, and move forward again. As long as there are people who still need me, I haven't lost everything, nor have I lost myself. What I can say is that all these trials have made me stronger and cultivated a heart that does not fear life. **I've learned that the moment you decide, 'I won't give up,' no matter the difficulty, the problem is already overcome.** So, please never give up on your life. **Even if you don't have the means to overcome this obstacle right now, life will surely find a way for you.**"



Interviewer profile

**Motoko Katayama**

Since her university days, she has been involved in addressing the conflict in former Yugoslavia as a volunteer and UN intern. Inspired by Sadako Ogata, she pursued a graduate degree in international development studies while raising her daughter. Started to work as JICA Serbo-Croatian training coordinator, she worked in the overseas office and the domestic center. Currently assigned to Infrastructure Management Department.

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From the interviewer

Yugoslavia comprised "seven borders, six republics, five ethnic groups, four languages, three religions, and two scripts." Amid the conflict, Ms. Smilja supported her neighbors from different ethnic groups and continued advocating for peace from the basement of a battleground—this is her story of overcoming despair and passing hope to the next generation."



JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 7

# Difficulties are my motivation

The girl who escaped bombings  
and built a support network in Japan



### **Agalyn Nagase**

Born in Mindanao, Philippines. Agalyn fled her hometown in her high school years to escape the civil war. While living at a refugee shelter, she began supporting children in situations similar to hers. Agalyn married a Japanese man she met while working as a social worker and moved with him to Japan. She established "KAFIN," a support group for Filipino women and other migrants from abroad living in Japan, and has continued to support people facing hardship over many years.

Bombings burned down her hometown, and she barely escaped with her life before reaching a refugee shelter. There, she started a school for children, even though she was only a student herself. This young woman was Agalyn Nagase, representative of the nonprofit organization, "KAFIN Migrant Center."

She witnessed senseless violence and death occurring right before her eyes. . . . In the midst of this, Agalyn took it upon herself to act, negotiate, and lend a helping hand. She has always chosen to help people without hesitation.

Even after migrating to Japan, Agalyn continued her work. She has continued to support isolated Filipino women living in Japan and to listen to the voices of those who are rarely heard.

"Difficulties are my motivation." Behind these words lies her story—a path of never giving up on trusting in others and holding on to hope, no matter how many times she was hurt.

## **Amid a civil war that took her house and family**

Agalyn was born and raised in a rural village in Mindanao, Philippines. The fourth born of nine siblings, she had been living a simple life with her parents, who were farmers. This peaceful life was turned upside down during her school years. A few months after her father passed away, the island broke out into a civil war.

Her family's house was burned down, and her family was separated while fleeing for their lives from their hometown. It took Agalyn three

weeks to cross the mountains, hiding from falling bombs and burning houses.

She finally reached a refugee shelter in General Santos City, but it wasn't a haven.

"I desperately searched for my family, but it was hell there. In the Southern Philippines around that time, there was an order to 'kill all Muslims, regardless of whether they have disabilities or are children.' My uncle, who was blind, was summoned by the army, and I witnessed them tie him to a coconut tree and kill him. I also saw many people being tortured and buried alive. The reason I survived being in such places was my ability to speak different languages. Being a Muslim, I was a target for killing. However, since I was able to speak many languages, the army couldn't determine whether I was a Muslim or not. My ability to communicate with the soldiers is what saved me.

"While being in a life-threatening situation myself, I happened to be present at the scene of what is said to be the worst massacre in the Southern Philippines.

"It happened while I was searching for information about my missing family. The army suddenly appeared and killed 1,500 men who were at the mosque. They dug an enormous pit on the beach using a bulldozer, and they kept on pushing corpses into it. . . . The area was overflowing with the dead, making it difficult even to walk. Had I said anything in protest, I'm sure I would have been killed, too. I said nothing of what I saw and could only sear it into my memory."

It was a hell where even walking was difficult, a place surrounded by death. Yet, in this abyss of despair, an incredible miracle occurred.

All ten separated family members, including her mother and siblings, were reunited. Agalyn and her family, after experiencing refugee shelter life, found a small place where the ten of them could live, and started a new life from the depths of despair.

## **Educational activities that supported the future of the children at the refugee shelter**

Agalyn's family was miraculously reunited; however, a household of ten living in a small room was even harsher than they had imagined. After family discussions, each family member also took a role to support the family.

While her siblings provided for the family by working at banana plantations or shining shoes, Agalyn chose a different path. She believed that she should do something to help the children at the refugee shelter in General Santos City, where she had been taken care of.

"After discussing it with the imam, the religious leader of the mosque, I opened a small school at the back of the mosque. I was just a high school student myself, so I could only teach on the weekends, but about 30 children would gather there. It was also a great help, I believe, that the children from the unsanitary shelter had a place to wash themselves.

"While caring for the next generation, I also volunteered to bury the

deceased. I spoke with the scared, bereaved families and continued negotiating with the army, which had suspicions that the remaining family members were insurgents. I was subjected to interrogations and psychological pressure, **but I swore to myself that I wouldn't give up until I recovered their bodies, and I was able to get the army to return three bodies to their families."**

While facing death every day, Agalyn focused on what she could do, tackling one task at a time. Then, one day, she met a German woman affiliated with a church who was visiting the refugee shelter. This encounter would have a profound impact on Agalyn's destiny.

"She saw what I was doing and said it was remarkable. She asked me about my situation and family, and many other things. Moved by my story, she then asked, 'Do you have any interest in continuing your education?' I told her honestly, 'I want to pursue higher education, but I don't have any means to do that right now.' She replied, 'If you really want to, I'll support you so you can receive an education at university.'"

That moment opened a door to a future she had never imagined.

## **Balancing learning and support— years on the move as a social worker**

With the support of that church worker, Agalyn was able to graduate from university. However, instead of taking the secure

path, she decided to return to the refugee shelter in her hometown. This time, she wanted to contribute to regional development as a community worker, armed with the knowledge of economics she had gained at university.

Agalyn visited Catholic churches, local government offices, and welfare agencies to ensure that food reached the children who needed it. However, the reality of martial law was harsh. Gunshots could be heard in the city, and people were taken away for no reason. Nevertheless, she didn't give up. She continued these activities for over eleven years. Amid all this, she started to realize what this war was really about.

"At the time, the war in Mindanao was not a religious conflict, but rather a 'war for development.' Indigenous peoples were driven out to develop mines, and farmland was made into export crop plantations. Many people were driven out of their homes. Those who didn't leave found themselves in highly militarized situations and suffered severe oppression or, in some cases, were even massacred. It wasn't a simple situation where you could say the perpetrator was the Muslims or the Christians. Both had their land taken away and had to make sacrifices for the sake of 'development.'"

While battling these monumental injustices every day, Agalyn met a Japanese man while participating in relief efforts after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo. He would later become her husband. As she prepared to start a new life in Japan, she made sure her efforts

would continue even after her departure.

"Before leaving the Philippines, I established a non-profit organization called 'Moro Women's Center.' It is a facility that supports women and children suffering from abuse and violence. When I moved to Japan, a trusted person close to me took over the activities."

## **The confusion and loneliness of starting over in Japan**

After Agalyn got married, she came to Japan in 1996. Leaving the civil war zone, she was filled with anticipation. She thought, "Maybe I'll feel at peace." What awaited her, however, was a deep and quiet stress, different from the constant risk of death she had left behind.

"To be honest, I had been looking forward to getting some rest, to be freed from complicated relationships and many other problems I had been experiencing in the Philippines. But when I came to Japan, I couldn't speak a word of Japanese, and that was very stressful.

"Even if I went out shopping, I couldn't ask how much something cost. Without my husband with me, I couldn't do anything at all. The stress was so unbearable that I even wished to go back to the Philippines, despite the harsh circumstances there.

"Seeing the state I was in, my husband asked the local library to stock Philippine newspapers for me. I went there every day, but life without knowing the language or having close relationships felt empty, and I couldn't find a sense of purpose.

"Then, one day, a Japanese friend living in Tokyo asked me if I'd be interested in volunteering with them in Sanya. I decided to participate. We did night patrols, handing out food and blankets to people sleeping outdoors. 'Why is a foreigner helping us?' was the puzzled look I would receive at times, **but the feeling of being useful to someone gradually filled the emptiness in my heart.**"

It wasn't easy finding a place to belong within society, like when she was in the Philippines. However, this small step unexpectedly opened the next door.

## **Meeting women from her hometown: the starting point for "KAFIN"**

When Agalyn started living in Nishi-Kawaguchi, Saitama, she started attending a Japanese language school. It was there that she met women from her hometown.

"I was able to meet several Filipino women at school. What's more, they were all from Davao City, Mindanao. They had all been living in Japan longer than I had, so at first, I learned a lot about life in Japan from them. Eventually, while listening to their stories, it became clear to me that many of the women who married Japanese men were suffering from deep isolation, violence, and cultural friction in their married lives. Many were suffering from domestic violence.

"I thought about how I could effectively help these women. While searching for ways to do this, I was able to gain the cooperation of a

Catholic church in Urawa and provide a place for Filipino women to talk about their problems by setting up an open house there.

"In time, word spread about this gathering, and it turned into a large group: the 'Kawaguchi Filipino Neighborhood for Empowerment (KFNE).' In the end, this group led to the founding of the current support group, 'KAFIN.'"

The starting point for KAFIN was the desire to "help" and a desperate plea for "connection." Shared difficulties created a sense of solidarity.

## **Making the voices of Filipino women living in Japan visible**

When the activities of KAFIN started to take off, Agalyn was still persistently reaching out, with a pen and a memo pad in hand.

"If I saw a Filipino woman with her Japanese husband at the supermarket or in the park, I would wait until she was alone and then talk to her. I would tell her about our work, we would exchange phone numbers, and I would contact her a few days later. I continued doing this.

"I was very careful about what time to call them, because it wasn't uncommon for them to ask me to avoid calling them when their husbands were home. Through repeated conversations, the dire situation of how many women were suffering from domestic violence from their husbands or emotional abuse from their in-laws became

clear.

"Another common factor was that many of these women had been working in the nightlife industry when they met their husbands. This fact often became a major obstacle in building an equal relationship in their marriage. I also heard stories of many suffering from not only violence, but cultural oppression, such as being told not to cook Filipino dishes or not to speak in their native language when calling their family.

"In order to change this situation, KAFIN decided to start holding both Japanese language study sessions and discussion meetings. By sharing their experiences and problems, the participants were gradually able to express their inner thoughts.

"Furthermore, in order to support their financial independence, we introduced the traditional Filipino mutual aid of 'paluwagan.' This is similar to the 'ko' system in Japan, where money is set aside every month and you can receive a lump sum in order. There were some women who used this money for living expenses or to pay for a trip home to the Philippines."

In this way, KAFIN activities expanded from emotional support into financial support. As this system of mutual support solidified, the trust among participants deepened.

Mutual aid and cultural understanding—activities spreading nationwide.

At that time, many women came to Japan in order to work. They were dispatched to "Philippine pubs" throughout Japan and worked

in the service industry. Kawaguchi is one of the areas with many Philippine pubs. Of the Japanese residents in that area, more than a few harbored negative stereotypes about Filipino women. That, coupled with prejudice against the nightlife industry, in some cases, resulted in friction between the Filipino wives and their families.

"At that time in Kawaguchi, there was a tendency to stereotype Filipino women as 'entertainers,' a term often used with negative connotations. That was another reason why the Japanese husbands and their families were prejudiced against them. But in reality, each individual has a different personality, and each individual has different talents.



"We felt that the key to resolving this type of situation was to show people what these women were really like, and so we decided to participate in the city's international exchange event. There, we showcased vibrant traditional Filipino dances and Filipino home cooking.

"One member persuaded her hesitant parents-in-law to come to the venue. Her in-laws were deeply moved by the sight of her dancing energetically on stage and proudly serving Filipino dishes. Experiencing the brilliant culture and delicious food, which they had previously had no interest in, changed the way that they saw her. Although it may have seemed like a small thing to the community, I believe that it was an extremely important step."

KAFIN's successful model spread nationwide, and similar groups emerged one after another in Osaka, Nagoya, Nagano, Gunma, Sendai, and all over Japan. Their activities also evolved and expanded. They secured a temporary shelter for domestic violence victims and started offering support to technical intern trainees who were having difficulties.

"Luckily, I have the full support of my husband, who acts as an interpreter at our meetings," Agalyn shared. Even after relocating to Japan, her struggle continued.

## **What is true empowerment? Knowledge can protect women**

Approximately twenty years after moving to Japan. Agalyn's

group's work has developed from a community group to the non-profit corporation "KAFIN Migrant Center," which has supported over 200 women to date. At present, they have expanded their network of support to cover people with limited access to education and children who are not recognized by their Japanese fathers.

The "empowerment of women" is always at the heart of these activities.

"We are also involved in providing support for people who have come to Japan but are forced to work long hours without having had sufficient learning opportunities, as well as Japanese-Filipino children who are not recognized by their Japanese fathers.

"While offering emotional support is important, it's not enough. **Our goal is to give these women the knowledge and options that will enable them to forge their own paths on their own.** Some groups that deal with women's issues stop at just getting together, socializing, and sharing stories, but I believe that it's necessary for these women to become stronger—to be empowered.

"I have seen the 'DV cycle' play out many times, where a woman repeatedly leaves an abusive husband only to return. In some cases, this cycle lasted over ten years. To break this vicious cycle, I believe that practical knowledge—about laws concerning DV and residency, skills for financial independence—is just as indispensable as emotional support.

"You have these rights, as one human being, as a woman, as a wife, as a person from another country living in Japan.' That is what we tell them. Some women regret not having known this information

sooner, but I tell them it's never too late to learn."

First, bodies and souls find rest at the shelter. Next comes "knowing" one's rights and potential. From there, learning begins, and eventually, the strength to walk forward independently emerges.

Agalyn speaks with conviction: **"The beginning of everything is 'to know.'"**

## **Beyond country borders and gender, in hopes of a circle of "respect" that reaches all people**

What Agalyn consistently advocates through her work is the importance of "mutual respect." For her, respect is first learning about yourself and then sharing that with the other person.

"If the other person doesn't know about our culture, it's hard to have them respect it. That's exactly why we must let them know about our culture. You can then start respecting yourself, and in turn, you can respect others. This cycle creates mutual understanding.

"I believe that mutual understanding dwells in everyday life, not just at big events like international festivals, which showcase culture.

"Take, for example, daily morning greetings. When I first came to Japan, even if I greeted my neighbors, some wouldn't return the greeting after they found out that I was a foreigner. But I continued to greet them, and as a result, my neighbors started initiating conversations with me after a few years.

**"This accumulation of 'small, everyday acts' transformed**

**our relationship from one where I was 'just a foreigner,' to one where I was 'a trustworthy neighbor,' which then led to their understanding of my work.**

**"Ultimately, respect begins with respecting yourself. Only when you start respecting yourself can you respect others. First, get to know yourself, and then get to know the other person. This cycle creates mutual understanding.**

"That's why I want to appeal for solidarity across nationality and gender.

"Although progress has been made in the development of laws regarding domestic violence, the legal system is still weak regarding the promotion of gender equality. I want for women to join hands, and for men to join our activities as well, helping with venue preparations or public relations activities—even driving to go rescue victims—any small contribution provides immeasurable support."

How has Agalyn been able to continue helping people for so long? She responded with quiet resolve.

"It's because I myself have accepted my weaknesses and know ways to manage my stress: spending time in my garden and chatting with friends. That's how I ground myself and find the strength to face problems again.

**"We're all human beings; we all face a multitude of problems. If there's someone in front of me in need of help, regardless of gender, I want to help. That's all."**

## Uniting to overcome difficulties

No matter how positive an outlook you have, everyone hits "walls" in life. Agalyn emphasizes that those are the times when you shouldn't suppress your inner voice and need to connect with someone. She especially calls out to people who give their all at work, at home, and for their careers.

"I really want people who dedicate their lives to their work, families, or careers to, in some way, participate in activities for women. It will no doubt become a safe place where you can express your feelings and share the problems that you face daily.

**"People can change if they have a place to express themselves.** You don't have to keep all your worries and pain to yourself. Sharing it with someone will enable you to move forward, little by little. And through such connections, we can become united. **Through the solidarity of many women and their allies, our united voices are bound to have an impact on society and bring about real change in women's status, rights, and gender equality.** Your voice has the power to help make that happen."



Interviewer profile

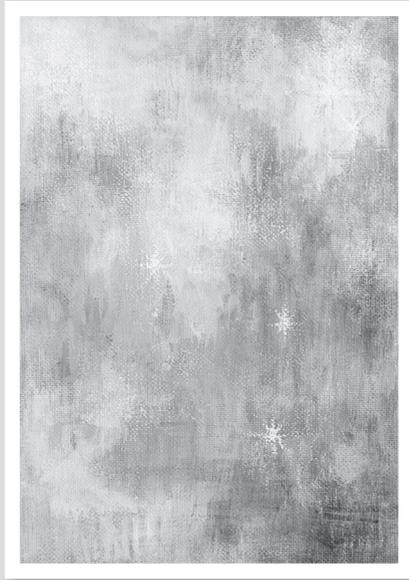
**Ai Shinkawa**

After completing graduate school, she joined this project following a JICA internship. Currently engaged in political and social situations research at the Embassy of Japan in Singapore, her connection with Agalyn began in her university days, when she sought research support regarding Filipino women living in Japan.

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From the interviewer

"Agalyn is an extraordinary person who dedicates her life to helping others. Her statement—that only by respecting oneself can one truly respect others—deeply moved me. As someone aspiring to support others, her words gave me a positive outlook, making me think, *Maybe I can be useful to someone, too.*"



JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 8

# Rooted in hope

A single mother's strength  
in Zambia



### **Anita Selina Phiri**

Born in 1994 in Zambia. The youngest of four siblings, she lost both parents shortly after birth and was raised by her eldest sister. Currently, as a single mother who has never married and is raising two children, she works as a cleaner at the JICA Zambia office and as a part-time hairstylist.

Anita Selina Phiri was born in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. She lost both parents shortly after birth and suffered abuse and sexual violence during her childhood.

At 16, she took on the responsibility of supporting her family and was forced to abandon her education. Yet, sustained by faith and friendship, she now raises two children as a single mother.

Currently working at the JICA Zambia Office, she continues moving forward with her goals—"I want to go back to school" and "I want to open a hair salon." Her words reveal the true meaning of hope: that it is not some grand dream in the distant future, but the accumulation of small acts of courage lived each day.

## **A life defined by challenges from childhood**

Zambia: an inland nation in southern Africa. Visitors are captivated by its vast savannahs, the beauty of nature, the vibrant wildlife, and the diverse cultures woven by over 70 ethnic groups. In this nation of approximately 21 million people, each ethnic group preserves its own language and traditions while coexisting. In this corner of Zambia, one woman lives quietly yet powerfully.

For Anita, a single mother raising two children while working as a cleaner at the JICA Zambia Office, life has not been smooth. She lost both parents shortly after birth and lived with her older sister.

"My father passed away while my mother was pregnant, and my mother died when I was four months old. I was the youngest of four siblings, and my eldest sister took on the role of my mother, raising me. I experienced abuse and sexual violence as a child, so I could not enjoy a normal childhood, but my sister always supported me. I am grateful she raised me until I could stand on my own."

In Zambia, it is not uncommon for children to be raised by relatives rather than their biological parents. However, this can sometimes lead to a risk of abuse. The reality is that many people experience gender-based sexual violence and abuse.

"Sexual violence is not only an act that inflicts physical pain; it violates a person's dignity and leaves deep, invisible scars. It is not just pain. It is a crime, a stain, a betrayal of trust. Honestly, it is incredibly difficult to describe this sense of loss. But no matter what happens, you must eventually recover and keep walking your path in life. **Even suffering as a victim, standing on the edge of despair, I managed to move forward step by step by believing that a better tomorrow was always possible.**"

From this experience, Anita learned the importance of "speaking up" not just for her own children, but for society as a whole. It is the first step in protecting oneself, and simultaneously, a force that drives societal change.

"We must teach children the importance of saying 'no.' Saying 'no'

means clearly expressing your own will and protecting your dignity.

**I strongly believe children must understand the importance of 'no.'**"

## **Life at 16, shouldering family responsibilities**

Despite facing abuse and sexual violence, her older sister showered her with love like a mother. Yet, financial struggles were inescapable. In many poor Zambian households, children are expected to support their families as laborers from a young age. Often, education—a right promised to every child—is postponed in exchange for work needed to survive the present. Anita was no exception.

"At 16, I had to take care of my family. I had to choose between going to school or working. In Zambia, the education curriculum ends in Grade 12, but I gave up my studies in Grade 10. I chose to support my siblings' lives, giving up on completing my education."

She chose work, thinking of her family. But the responsibility was heavy for a 16-year-old girl, casting a dark shadow over her mind and body. While her friends studied at school and dreamed about their futures, she was alone, driven by hard labor that pushed her to her mental limits. The decision to support her family at the cost of sacrificing herself brought immense conflict and exhaustion to her mind and body.

"I was still just a child back then, and I often felt I'd reached my limit. It felt like I was carving pieces of myself away and giving them up. I lost sight of who I truly was."

In that darkness, a ray of light appeared: a friendship born from a chance encounter. This meeting slowly and gently began to thaw the frozen heart of young Anita.

"While helping with housework at one home, I met the wife's younger sister. She looked at me and asked, 'Why do you look so miserable?' That is how our friendship began. She encouraged me and gave me sound advice. She helped me look for work and even looked after the children when I was working. She is truly a wonderful friend."

Her friend's words became the catalyst for Anita to reexamine herself. For Anita, who had lived solely for her family until then, it was the first time she was asked to consider something "for herself."

"She said, 'Why don't you sit in a quiet place and think deeply? Then ask yourself: What do you want? What do you want to achieve?' Those words helped me regain my composure and start thinking about what I truly desired. **By continually asking myself, 'Is this the life I want for myself?' I slowly began to find my answer.**"

## **Living as a single mother**

Another turning point arrived in her already challenging life: becoming a mother to two children.

"I gave birth to and raised my children as an unmarried single mother, which comes with a great deal of responsibility and sacrifice. Especially in my situation, financial issues were the biggest challenge. So, for my children's sake, I started working as a cleaner at the JICA Zambia office."

Days are spent leaving home early in the morning and working late into the night, yet that alone is not enough; she walks about four kilometers to work every day. This journey is not merely a commute—it is a path paved with her determination and hope.

"This commute time is precious to me. I reflect on the day's events, plan for tomorrow, and think about my children's future. I believe every step connects to their future. My children are my greatest support. They encourage me to push harder."

## **Another dream: hairdressing**

Alongside her JICA work, Anita has another role. She uses her free time to work part-time as a hairdresser. Hairdressing was another dream she had cherished since childhood. For her, forced to abandon her studies due to financial reasons, acquiring a skill

was a crucial means to forge a path to independence.

"I've loved playing with hair since I was a child and learned from my older sister. I specialize particularly in traditional African hairstyles. Hairdressing brings me immense joy. Making someone's hair beautiful brings a smile to their face; seeing their smiles is my greatest reward. Through this work, I feel connected to people and can contribute to society."

She dreams of running her own hair salon. Behind this dream lies



not just a desire for business success, but also her own journey of overcoming suffering and hardship. It holds a strong wish to support young people facing similar circumstances.

"I want to have my own hair salon someday. I especially want to provide a safe place for young people like me who could not attend school to learn. Right now, I don't have enough funds, and my monthly income is limited, but I hope to open the salon next year."

Both her work at JICA and her work as a hairdresser are "investments in the future" for her. Even when she is tired, imagining the children's smiles helps her overcome any hardship.

## **Small hopes that color life**

Her life has not been a smooth path, yet she says quietly, **"Honestly, I am not sure if my life was difficult. Because that was simply my life."** Her words reveal a strength that accepts challenges without seeing them as hardships, pushing forward regardless. For her, life's walls were obstacles to overcome, not reasons to stop.

"I wanted to finish my education to support my siblings' futures, but unfortunately, things didn't go as planned. But that's life, I suppose. It is never perfect, and you face many difficulties and challenges. That is precisely why I believe the most important thing is to hold onto hope. And never lose that hope. I am saving money so I can return to school someday. So, I want everyone to remember: no matter how

deep the despair, do not lose hope. **Life has many walls, but we can overcome them. Believe in yourself and take it one step at a time**—a better tomorrow will definitely come."

That is why she builds each day step by step, envisioning her dreams: "I want to go back to school," "I want to have my own salon." For her, "hope" is not some distant, unreachable thing in the future. It is the accumulation of small joys she feels every day—waking up in the morning, seeing her children's faces, and walking to JICA.

**"The future doesn't just suddenly arrive one day. I believe it gradually takes shape by living each day with care."**



Interviewer profile

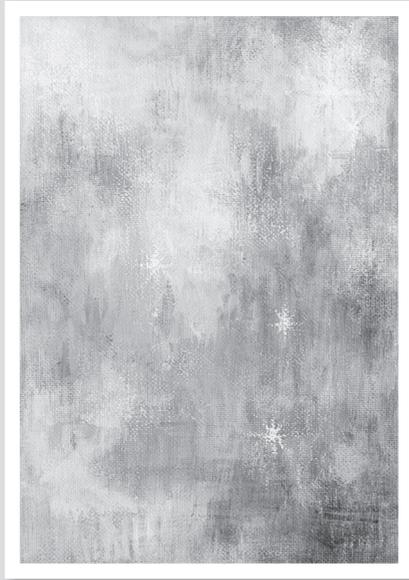
**Mwape Kapumpa**

Program Officer, JICA Zambia Office. Since joining in 2014, she has worked in fields such as transport, energy, and urban development, consistently pouring her passion into gender development and women's empowerment. In Zambia, where women face challenging circumstances, she integrates gender awareness into development projects and works to empower women in diverse ways.

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From the interviewer

"Anita's story embodies an indomitable spirit and the transformative power of courage. I was deeply moved by her journey of overcoming numerous hardships to carve out a future for herself and her children. In Zambia, where access to education and healthcare is limited and gender-based violence is widespread, voices like hers—often silenced—are essential for development that leaves no one behind. I hope her story reaches a wider audience."



JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 9

# Bridging Japan and Ukraine

A young torchbearer's determination  
to overcome war and division



**Mariia Bondarenko**

Born in Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine. Studied international relations at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and came to Japan in 2022 after the outbreak of war. After graduating from university and studying at a Japanese language school, she organized exhibitions in Japan on the war in Ukraine and gained experience as a JICA intern. After that, she assisted in developing human resources for Ukraine's reconstruction at JSUS. Now, having returned to Ukraine, she continues to contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine while leveraging her bond with Japan.

\*The interview was conducted before Mariia returned to Ukraine.

Fleeing the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, Mariia Bondarenko and her husband sought refuge in Japan. Through support programs, she studied Japanese intensively and became involved in assisting other evacuees through activities with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Japanese Supports for Ukrainian Students (JSUS).

Amid times of doubt and losing sight of her future, she rediscovered a sense of purpose through helping others.

"What can I do for Ukraine?" With that question in mind, Mariia decided to return home, sharing her journey of resilience and her commitment to building hope.

## **Days that began in two hometowns: Kharkiv and Kyiv**

At the age of three, she moved with her parents to the capital, Kyiv, for her father's work. Her grandparents remained in Kharkiv, so she often returned to visit them. Over time, she came to think of both Kharkiv and Kyiv as her hometowns. At university, she majored in international relations. It was a newly established program that allowed students to choose much of their own curriculum. Among the elective subjects, Mariia happened to come across Japanese.

"In junior high school, I once tried studying Japanese on my own, so I thought this would be a great chance to learn it again. I was

surprised to find that Japanese was offered as a foreign language subject that could earn many credits, so I decided to take it. The number of classes was limited, but I was happy to realize I could still remember hiragana and katakana."

That peaceful university life, however, came to an abrupt end on February 24, 2022—the day Russia launched its military invasion. Her family was forced to live apart: her father stayed in Kyiv, while her mother fled west with her younger siblings. The children continued attending school in Kyiv, traveling back and forth from their evacuation site each week and combining in-person with online classes.

"Of course, there was fear that missiles would be fired at the city, but what I found even more terrifying was the prospect of the draft. There are also unmanned weapons such as drones, but ultimately, in war, you must fight directly with humans. At the outbreak of the war, the draft applied to men aged 27 to 60. At the time, my partner was 20 years old, so he wouldn't be drafted any time soon, but if you consider history, university students in the past have been mobilized as well, so I was always uneasy as to when it would be his turn."

## **Fleeing war for Japan: a path forged through mutual support**

As the war broke out, Mariia and her partner decided to marry. **In the unlikely event that he would be drafted and injured in battle,**

**only close relatives would be allowed to visit him. Because of that, they chose to legally become family.** However, beyond that, they couldn't see what the future held.

"If possible, I wanted to leave Ukraine to go somewhere overseas with my husband, but I could not think beyond that. Around the time we first discussed escaping to the west of Ukraine, a university professor who knew that I was studying Japanese introduced me to a program for evacuating to Japan.

"The program was available to be used by families, so I applied with my husband, and we were fortunate enough to be accepted as international students. At the time, in principle, it was prohibited for men over 18 to leave the country, but international students were exceptionally permitted to leave. Thanks to that opportunity, the two of us were somehow able to reach Japan safely.

"We, as a couple, were able to come to Japan the year the invasion started. On the other hand, my father remained in Kyiv, and my mother and younger siblings remained in a city in the west. We have not been able to meet for a long while, and I never stop worrying."

## **From evacuee to supporter — a bridge between Ukraine and Japan**

After fleeing to Japan and studying at a Japanese language school for a year, Mariia returned to Ukraine temporarily and worked at the Japanese embassy in Kyiv. However, after feeling a disconnect at work there, she decided to return to Japan. A major turning

point came when she began her internship with JICA. She found great satisfaction in her work supporting employment for Ukrainian evacuees, including planning and implementing events.

Once her internship ended, she had a second encounter with fate. She was approached by a representative of JSUS, which had once accepted her into Japan, and she ended up working for them as a full-time staff member. **It was a major step, from being the one who received support to becoming the one who offered it.**

"When I first received support, everything was emergency aid. However, this time, there was a clear theme of 'developing human resources for reconstruction' to cultivate human resources who can learn specialized knowledge and skills in Japan and contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine in the future. This lofty goal resonated deeply with me. Working together with JICA, I poured myself into planning and implementing educational programs for their future. The 10 students we accepted this time are still studying diligently at Japanese language schools.

She worked at JSUS until the end of May 2025. In June, Mariia took on a new challenge: a job at the forefront of connecting the two countries by supporting Japanese companies seeking to expand into Ukraine.

"I work with Japanese companies that aim to enter the Ukrainian market. There is a subsidy program for Japanese companies to start

businesses in Ukraine, and my main role is to assist them with the complex application process and to serve as an intermediary between these companies and local Ukrainian government agencies, acting as an interpreter and coordinator. Ukrainian laws are exceedingly difficult to grasp, and the differences with Japan in business culture are significant. I put in great effort every day, standing in between the two and using language to bridge the gap so that they can understand each other."

## **From a future stolen by war to a reimagined way of life**

Mariia began a new life when she fled to Japan with her husband. However, the war brought about immeasurable changes within her.

The biggest change was that she could no longer live life as before, envisioning her own future and making plans for it.

"The war made it impossible for anyone to plan for the future, whether they fled the country or remained. The foundations of everyone's plans for their lives vanished in a moment at the military invasion. There was no safe place, and even if you moved, you did not know what was ahead. Almost every Ukrainian was in a situation where they were unable to make plans for even the next week. Everything I had planned—my dreams and career—was destroyed by the war, and I had no choice but to change the way I thought about life.

"Building a career, living in a nice home. . . . Such personal life goals

proved to be fragile and ultimately powerless. And so, naturally, **my thinking changed from prioritizing my own successes and safety to wanting to do something useful for society and to help people through my work.** It changed to thinking of what I could do for the country of Ukraine. I still have not found the answer, but in stark contrast to how I lived as an 'individual' before, the awareness of living as a 'member of Ukrainian society' has emerged.

"With that thought in mind, I reconsidered what I could do when I was in Japan. When I first fled, I could not speak Japanese and could only study, which was frustrating and difficult at times. But while I was studying Japanese, I desperately started doing what I could do. Even if I could only speak broken Japanese, I began sharing the reality of the war and participating in fundraising activities. As a result, these activities also led to my Japanese improving."

Through her activities in Japan, Mariia discovered a newfound sense of purpose. However, as that thought became stronger, her mind was drawn to one conclusion: to go in the opposite direction of reason and safety. She had no intention to stay in Japan.

"Originally in Ukraine, there was a strong trend of aspiring to move overseas. This time, when fleeing to Japan, when I spoke with other evacuees, close to 90 percent said they wanted to remain in Japan. If you prioritize thinking of your own future and safety, continuing to live in Japan is by far more reasonable, to the point where even my parents back in Ukraine would say, 'Please, we ask you, stay in Japan.'

"No one was forcing me to, but rather than turning my back on my roots and on the reality of the suffering of my compatriots, and rather than living in a safe place by myself, I wanted to support Ukraine. Returning home while the war continues means exposing myself to real danger. The economy could collapse; life and finding a job could be difficult. I could not see the future. If I were who I was before the start of the war, I would surely consider myself foolish for choosing to return to the country after having already left it. But now, I do not think so.

"Even when speaking with other Ukrainians in the same circumstances, they could not understand how I felt. Because of this, I often questioned if this was the right decision. But I knew in the depths of my heart that if I genuinely wanted to do anything for Ukraine, there was no path outside of returning and living alongside them. However, it is honestly still difficult to completely sort out those feelings within myself."

## **Complex feelings and hopes toward Russia**

We asked Mariia about her current feelings toward the war and its unprecedented devastation.

"When the war started, I was still in Ukraine. Without knowing how long it would last, I felt it was tragic that life could never return to the way it was. I felt that there was no turning back. I felt that now that the war has broken out, it is impossible to obtain a truly happy life. I had a strong feeling of hopelessness, as though everything had

lost its meaning.

"But during that time, I fled to Japan, and amidst my new life, I felt hope when doing work for Ukraine. However, even still, that feeling of despair does not disappear. The war continues even today, and even if it ends eventually, many lives will be lost by that time. Even if we live past the war, **the feeling of those lost years as 'stolen time' will remain with the Ukrainian people forever, long after the war ends.**"

Her thoughts directed toward Russia itself are complex.

"As much as I try to be calm, I can't help becoming emotional whenever the topic of Russia comes up. Not just me, but most Ukrainians as well. Among them, some people speak with strong hatred, and I cannot judge them for it.

"The background as to why many Ukrainians think this way is in light of historical problems. Looking back on history, familiarity with Russia is not natural, but rather has been forced upon Ukraine. Russia has not only repeatedly threatened our very existence through military force, but has also deprived us of our language and culture. As a result, Ukrainians speak Russian and learn Russian literature, but it is by no means evidence of friendship between the two countries.

"In the future, it is possible that one day reconciliation will come between the two nations, but I cannot imagine that I will be able to overcome this feeling. I only hope that Russia, as a country, would change its imperialistic attitude and truly treat other countries'

cultures with respect and dignity. That is all I ask for now."

## **Self-confidence gained by fumbling through challenges**

Although Mariia continues to face great difficulties because of the war, she also faced inner barriers within herself.

"Initially, my university in Ukraine had been newly established, and I was always anxious about what to do. Even after coming to Japan, the language barrier was incredibly high, and I felt like I was just feeling my way through in the dark. However, to overcome this barrier, I thought I had no choice but to take action. That was when I planned the exhibition: 'Unissued Diplomas.' It is a memorial to the sacrifice of students during the Russian invasion, to tell of the tragedies of war. I brought the exhibition to life in Japan, based on an idea from a university classmate.

"I had little confidence, having studied Japanese for only about six months, but thought, 'I can do it; I have to do it,' and started working frantically. Making venue preparations, drafting proposals and email exchanges in unskillful Japanese, creating explanatory texts—each was an intimidating challenge. But 'I have to share these tragedies of war with Japanese people' was the strong sense of mission that carried me through.

"Then, I was able to hold the exhibition successfully. Further, at a lecture held after the exhibition, I was able to directly converse

with people who had attended the exhibition. **Even with my shaky Japanese, I was able to convey my true feelings. Nothing made me happier than everyone's feedback and warm reactions."**

That experience of fumbling through challenges cultivated self-confidence within Mariia.

"Consequently, my Japanese improved considerably, but even more than that, the experience of accomplishing something helped me to grow significantly. Up until then, I had no confidence in myself. As a student, I always felt inferior to those around me, and I would compare myself to my husband, who was an outstanding classmate, and feel a deep sense of inferiority. But this venture in Japan changed me. Now, I have the confidence to take on challenges, whereas before I would have thought, 'It's impossible anyway,' and quit right away. I feel in my heart that I have increased my life options with my own hands.

"Prompted by the war, I now feel a strong desire to work for others more than for myself. Acting in accordance with those values, I feel that I can find meaning in my existence within this tragic reality, as well as a small but definite sense of salvation. It is a tough world. But trying to do good within that context gives meaning to life.

"The future is uncertain, and returning to Ukraine is scary; those feelings do not change. But if I can be of help to someone there, I will be more than satisfied. Continuing to act in accordance with what I personally believe is good—I now clearly feel that this is the hope that illuminates the future."

## Fake it till you make it

After overcoming numerous challenges and gaining new self-confidence, Mariia still carries a quiet anxiety about the future. For her, what kind of future does she envision after the war is over?

"A deep-rooted fear I've had since I was a student is the feeling that I lack any truly specialized skills. However, during my three years in Japan, I was able to acquire the skill of speaking Japanese. In a sense, it may be my greatest and only weapon right now. Thinking of it that way, it means that my future work may also be deeply related to the Japanese language and Japan. Having gained so much confidence from successfully organizing an exhibition despite my limited language skills, I still cannot imagine myself in an environment completely unrelated to Japan."

Her husband says, "Mariia, you can do anything," and encourages her as the one who understands her best. With the strength she gains from the support of those around her, Mariia has arrived at a simple philosophy, which is: asking yourself not whether you *can* do it, but whether you *want* to do it.

**"There is a phrase in English that perfectly expresses my experience: 'Fake it till you make it.'** To me, this is an incredibly important saying. The only way to become capable is to actually do it. Even if it is scary, even if you are unsure, even if you are afraid of failing—take the first step. I realized that it is this kind of proactive

attitude that paves the way forward. Adding to that, I believe that the sense of mission to help someone in greater need than yourself will give you the strength to overcome any obstacle.



**"Trying to save others goes hand-in-hand with saving yourself; it makes me realize that life has meaning.** With this deep conviction,

I want to continue moving forward, step by step."



Interviewer profile

**Hinako Shimoji**

Joined JICA in 2025 and currently works in procurement and contracting. During her JICA internship, she met Mariia and co-interviewer Takumi Iwasaki, with whom she planned and implemented employment support events for Ukrainian refugees in Japan.

**Takumi Iwasaki**

Joined JICA in 2025 and currently covers Francophone West Africa. Majored in international politics and studied in the UK. Deeply interested in peacebuilding, he conducted this interview based on connections formed during his internship.

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From the interviewer

"Mariia's words that everything being destroyed by the war forced [her] to change [her] way of thinking left a strong impression" (Shimoji). "I was deeply moved by her strong desire for peace despite facing the injustices of the world" (Iwasaki).





JICA Hikari Project

## Chapter 10

# Staying connected

A JICA officer's journey  
of recovery and resilience



**Kana Shimizukawa**

Born in Kuji City, Iwate Prefecture. Moved to Fukushima Prefecture during elementary school and experienced the Great East Japan Earthquake while in high school. Motivated by the disaster, she entered Tohoku University, where she studied social entrepreneurship and disaster recovery while devoting herself to volunteer work in affected areas. She also studied abroad in the United States and Thailand. After joining JICA in 2016, she worked in the Procurement Department for International Cooperation and the JICA Philippines Office. Currently in the Human Resources Department, she is involved in improving the organization's working environment through initiatives like next-generation development, promoting women's empowerment, and conducting regular awareness surveys. Balancing her work with raising two children, she continues to pursue both her professional mission and her role as a mother.

"Accept what you cannot change. And give your all to change what you can. "

These calm words come from Kana Shimizukawa, who works at JICA promoting next-generation development and women's empowerment. Behind her words lie the Great East Japan Earthquake she experienced as a high school sophomore and the journey of over a decade that followed.

She had dedicated herself to sports, believing effort would be rewarded, but faced setbacks and burned out. The earthquake then fundamentally upended her values. She became conscious of the everyday and her connection to society, immersing herself in overseas study and volunteer work during university. After joining JICA, she worked on the front lines during the pandemic at the JICA Philippines office and later engaged in organizational development at headquarters.

As a mother of two and a bridge between international cooperation fieldwork and the organization, she continues to build upon what she can do, moment by moment. How were her guiding values shaped along this remarkable path?

## **A sports-loving girl raised in Iwate and Fukushima**

Kana Shimizukawa was born in Kuji City, Iwate Prefecture, a town surrounded by sea and mountains. Over a decade ago, this

town gained fame as the setting for NHK's morning drama series Amachan. Due to her father's work, she moved to Fukushima Prefecture during elementary school and lived there until graduating high school. Despite moving several times, sports always remained central to her daily life. She loved running and being active more than anything else. She spent most of her after-school hours working up a sweat in judo, swimming, or soccer.

"Since both my parents worked, I think I felt a little lonely coming home after school to find my mom wasn't there. When I told her that, she said, 'Well then, go play sports.' It felt like my own kind of after-school care. Since I had an older brother five years my senior, I started by joining him at his judo and soccer classes.

"Later, when we moved to Fukushima, I wanted to continue the soccer I'd played in Iwate, but I was told, 'Girls can't join the soccer team.' I really wanted to keep playing soccer, but that wasn't possible. When I thought about what other sports girls could do, volleyball came to mind. Back then, women's volleyball was more mainstream than men's, and it had a strong image as a girls' sport. Judo wasn't an option in that area, and soccer was out of the question. Volleyball was the only option left for me."

It wasn't how she wanted to start, but as she immersed herself in volleyball, her innate competitive spirit ignited.

"I happened to join a top-level team, and the coach was well-known. Surrounded by so many incredible players, my desire to 'not lose' just

grew stronger and stronger. Since I wasn't tall, I eventually became the setter, the playmaker who directs the team. I really enjoyed that role.

"We were undefeated in practice matches within the prefecture. Everyone believed we would definitely make it to the national tournament, but we suffered an unexpected defeat at the prefectural tournament. It was my final match in my third year of junior high.

"Now I understand that in the world of competition, anything can happen, but back then, I couldn't accept the reality of losing. After the loss, for some reason, the entire team went to the faculty room and apologized to the teachers. That shows how much pressure we felt. It was my first, and biggest, setback. The sense of loss —feeling that our hard work had come to nothing —was overwhelming. For a while afterward, I felt completely burned out. I even hated watching volleyball and thought I never wanted anything to do with it again."

## **The values formed through the Great East Japan Earthquake**

Having lost her passion for volleyball and carrying an emptiness in her heart, she entered high school. It was an academically focused school, and while everyone around her was studying hard for university entrance exams, she struggled to find motivation. Watching her former teammates excel in youth national teams, she felt like she alone had strayed from the path. She kept playing volleyball half-heartedly, but a serious injury in which she dislocated her hip further widened the distance between her and the sport.

Then came March 11, 2011. Kana, a second-year high school student at the time, was in a volleyball class in the gymnasium.



"At first, it was just a small tremor, like 'Oh, an earthquake.' I thought maybe a heavier student had landed awkwardly, or some boys were fooling around and jumped down from somewhere. But the next moment, a violent jolt hit us like something thrusting up from the ground—so intense we couldn't stand. The teacher screamed, 'Run to the schoolyard!' with a terrifying expression. I knew this was no ordinary situation. But the shaking was too severe to run. When we reached the yard, it was a blizzard, freezing cold.

"The other students went home one by one, but I lived an hour and a half away from school and gave up on going home. I decided to walk the hour to the hospital where my mother worked. Sidewalks were cracked open, and there was a strong smell of gas in the air. I rushed into a convenience store, but shelves were bare—no food, no water. Worse, the toilets overflowed with sewage. When I finally reached the hospital, burst water pipes had flooded the entire building. My mother and the staff were rushing around transporting emergency patients and were in no position to look after me. I spent that night in the hospital parking lot. When I finally made it back home, my house was half-destroyed. I remember feeling utterly hopeless, thinking, 'How am I supposed to live like this?'"

Then, one week after the earthquake, evacuation began due to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident. She says her memories from that time are fragmented, but this experience fundamentally changed her values.

"Strangely, I don't have many memories of my own suffering. Instead, seeing the tsunami footage on TV and witnessing people grieving the loss of family members made me acutely aware that others were enduring far greater hardship. This disaster completely shifted my values. Before, I believed 'hard work pays off.' But I learned the harsh reality that the very environment you rely on can be suddenly taken away, before you even have a chance to try. **It was a painful lesson that there are things beyond my control. It wasn't about giving up, but realizing, 'First, I must accept this reality and move forward.'**

"I had already been interested in international cooperation since elementary school, when I saw footage of people living in what were called developing countries. But at that moment, my own devastated town overlapped with those images. No infrastructure, unable to go to school. It was the moment it became my own reality. How could I change this environment? What could I do about it? From that day on, I started thinking that way.

"Another thing that left a deep impression on me was how quickly relief supplies arrived from developing countries. Until then, I had rarely felt any real connection with the rest of the world. But in that moment, I realized that not only Japan, but people around the world were reaching out to help Tohoku. **It was the first time I began to think globally—to wonder what I, someone who still had a life ahead of me, could do to give back to the world for the support we had received.**"

## **What I learned through my work in the disaster area**

Carrying the question “What can I do now?” in her heart, Kana went on to study at Tohoku University. While studying social entrepreneurship and disaster recovery, she spent most of her time volunteering in the disaster areas.

Her first project was providing learning support for children who had lost family members in the disaster.

"I went to the tutoring center several times a week, helping with homework and reading books together. One boy with developmental disabilities left a particularly strong impression. I was only involved for two or three years, and I was always worried about how he would live his life going forward. But recently, I heard he got into the University of Tokyo. I'm sure he's been blessed with wonderful people since then and has rapidly developed his strengths. I was truly happy to have been able to be a part, even just a small part, of his life."

Alongside the learning support, she also helped rebuild homes in Onagawa Town, Miyagi Prefecture, which suffered severe damage from the tsunami.

"I worked alongside carpenters to repair houses that remained isolated in areas swept away. I helped hammer nails and clear debris. Honestly, I probably wasn't much help with the heavy lifting. But

knowing that this house would welcome people again, that warm smiles would return, I couldn't just stand by.

"At the same time, while continuing the work, alongside the joy of being thanked, there was also a sense of powerlessness. The scope of change I could directly bring about with my own hands was far too small. Plus, I felt keenly that this speed of recovery was possible precisely because it was Japan. In other countries, the process and speed of recovery would surely be entirely different. **Recognizing my own limitations and Japan's current reality made me start looking toward disaster recovery efforts overseas.**"

## **Disaster recovery and international cooperation seen abroad**

During university, she studied abroad in the United States and Thailand. In the U.S., she visited areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina, one of the largest hurricanes in history.

"One survivor had started an ice cream shop using locally sourced produce as its main ingredients. He told me, 'I didn't want my painful experience to end in pain alone. If you have time to hesitate, you should take action instead.' Seeing smiles return to the disaster area, and watching children run off happily after receiving ice cream in front of his shop, is something I still can't forget.

"In San Francisco, I also visited the city council and had the opportunity to directly observe and listen to discussions about disaster prevention radio systems and evacuation manuals. I was deeply

inspired by the uniquely American perspectives and approaches, such as the detailed discussions tailored to each city's characteristics and its diverse racial and cultural makeup."

Furthermore, to gain insight into international cooperation in developing countries, she traveled to Thailand, which had suffered flood damage.

"The university I visited was in an area that had been submerged by floodwaters not long before. The water marks were still vividly visible on the buildings, and people were working tirelessly on recovery efforts. Witnessing the international cooperation field in Thailand was when I first truly grasped the scale and the history of JICA's activities. They can approach things at the administrative level, tailored to the distinct needs of each country. On the day of the earthquake, when Japan was plunged into crisis, people around the world reached out to help us. I realized that this was because Japan had continued to cooperate internationally and had earned the trust of the global community. Within that vast scale of solidarity, I found a way to resolve the frustration I had felt—the sense of my own limitations and my desire to give back to the world. It was then that I felt a strong determination to become more deeply involved in international cooperation."

## **From supporting roles at JICA to the front lines**

In 2016, Kana joined JICA. Her initial assignment was to support

experts dispatched to developing countries. After taking maternity and childcare leave, she gained experience in contract management within the Procurement Department before being assigned to the Philippines Office in 2021.

"My assignment to the Philippines came right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Honestly, moving overseas with my then 3-year-old child filled me with nothing but anxiety. I worried about the local medical standards and the language barrier, but here, too, the mindset I gained from the earthquake disaster supported me: 'Accept what you cannot change.' Worrying about unchangeable circumstances is pointless. I decided to do the maximum preparation I could manage now.

"One major mission in the Philippines was establishing the cold chain for COVID-19 vaccines. This involved transporting vaccines maintained at the proper temperature for quality control to remote islands. The heat and the geographical conditions of the island nation were challenging, but being involved from the initial planning to the final delivery was a valuable experience."

At the same time, outside the office, she struggled to balance work and family life.

"Back then, information about transmission routes was conflicting and confusing. To minimize infection risk for my child, I avoided contact with anyone outside my immediate family as much as possible. The Philippines had lockdowns in place, prohibiting anyone

under 18 from going out at all. Daycare centers and kindergartens were closed, leaving me with no one to rely on. So, my husband, who was also stationed in the Philippines, and I took turns working from home. We managed to get through it, ensuring our child wasn't left alone. But I consciously avoided chasing ideals. **If I held onto expectations like 'I want to do this X days a week' or 'it should be like this, ' I'd get discouraged when external factors disrupted my plans. I knew I couldn't sustain that mindset.**

"Balancing work and childcare overseas was incredibly difficult, but the perspective I gained from the earthquake —that 'I'm not the only one facing hardship' —was a tremendous source of strength for me then. Everyone has their own circumstances. Even if things look smooth on the surface, everyone surely has their own constraints and worries. Thinking that way helped me accept reality—that I wasn't uniquely struggling."

## **Accept what you can't change, and give your all to what you can.**

After returning to Japan, Kana was assigned to the HR department, where she oversees next-generation development, promotion of women's empowerment, and employee awareness surveys. Improving the work environment is a long-term effort with results that take time to appear. Yet her conviction remains unwavering: "Change what you can with all your might."

"I don't dwell on things I can't change, but I want to change what

I can with everything I've got. For example, if we can streamline work to free up time, we might be able to take on the work we're truly passionate about. So, I start by gradually changing systems and workflows. I believe even small changes, when accumulated, can transform into significant shifts for the entire organization. "

At the core of these values lies that experience from her sophomore year of high school. Since that day, she reveals, she has become acutely aware of a responsibility that comes with being a survivor.

"I witnessed many people lose their lives while I survived. No one explicitly told me anything, but that fact has stayed deep within me, making me feel as if I was 'entrusted' with something. That's precisely why I want to stay connected to society and keep fulfilling my role.

"After having children, as I spent more time at home with just them, I would sometimes feel disconnected from society. That's precisely why the time I spend at work talking with adults, the time I feel connected to society through my job, is incredibly important to me. It's the moment I truly feel I'm alive and fulfilling my role within society."

Accepting what cannot be changed, finding what can be changed within that, and tackling it with all her might. It is this steady, honest effort that has become her source of strength.

## Choosing what feels right for me over what's “correct”

Now in her thirties, she faces the daily challenge of balancing career and parenting head-on. When asked for a message to her peers, she paused briefly before candidly sharing her own struggles.

"How to navigate your thirties. . . . Honestly, I don't have the answer either. While JICA promotes women's advancement and makes it easier to work, expectations and roles for mothers at home and in the community haven't changed much. I feel this actually increases women's burdens. I'm right in the middle of this struggle myself. But precisely because of that, I want to say: **even while struggling, please don't let go of what you want to do or what you value. Even if your environment changes or you face difficulties, you can keep moving forward by adjusting course each time.** That's how I'm progressing, one step at a time."

Her words are rooted in personal experience. During her assignment in the Philippines amid the pandemic, she navigated work and childcare with few people to rely on. The perspective gained after the earthquake—that "I'm not the only one struggling"—has become a daily anchor for her choices.

**"You don't have to strive for perfection. Just keep doing what you can within your capacity, and it will lead to the next step.** Even if you're giving your all to what's right in front of you now,

when you look back, you'll see that you've forged a path."



Interviewer profile

### **Tomomi Uchikawa**

After working in the private sector and studying abroad in graduate school, she joined JICA in 2003. She served as Director of the Gender Equality and Poverty Reduction Promotion Office from 2020, and as Deputy Director General in charge of labor, payroll, and welfare in the Human Resources Department from 2022, working on gender mainstreaming in both projects and in organizational operations. Kana worked under Uchikawa's leadership, with a Section Chief serving as the intermediary between them.

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From the interviewer

"I was deeply impressed by how she actively engaged in work beyond her assigned duties while raising two children, and that's why I recommended her. Her words—that since that day, she has carried a deep sense of responsibility for being kept alive—particularly resonated with me."

## Afterword

Thank you for reading this book to the end.

Nothing would make us happier than if even one of these stories resonated with you.

This book was created as part of the Hikari Project, initiated by JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency).

In a world where conflict and division persist, this project seeks to build a kinder, more peaceful world by fostering mutual understanding and connection between people through stories.

JICA maintains offices in 96 countries worldwide and 15 locations in Japan, continuing our international cooperation to nurture human potential and build nations for a better future.

Yet even now, conflicts persist across the globe, as people remain divided by nationality, gender, religion, culture, and values.

Without dialogue, such strife and isolation continue to grow.

Faced with this reality, we at JICA asked ourselves: Could we connect across all our "differences" through stories of life's joys and sorrows?

Could we empathize with the pain of someone in a distant land as if it were our own?

Precisely because we have faced countless challenges in the field

of international cooperation, we still want to believe the world can change through the gentle connections we build with one another.

This book is our own quiet act of defiance in this divided world.

Perhaps what the world truly needs is neither to fear nor shun differences, nor to win arguments, but rather for unnamed people like us to sit side by side as fellow human beings, share our stories, and simply be there for one another.

The ten women featured in this book have lived lives that were far from easy, yet they shared their stories with courage, hoping that their words might become a light for someone else.

The interviewers who listened closely to their voices and accompanied them warmly along the way, the designers who created the cover and illustrations that bring this book to life, and the children from the school for the deaf who designed the project logo — all are precious companions we met through international cooperation.

To you, facing adversity somewhere in the world at this very moment:

May the many precious "lights" we encountered through this project kindle a small light deep within your heart.

And may the world become just a little kinder.

JICA will continue to stand alongside every individual striving

around the world, cherishing each life with care and moving forward together toward a better future.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in creating this book.

We are connected under the same sky.

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# Light in the Dark

Ten Women's Stories of Hope, Woven Across the World

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