

Empowering Women Business Owners
in Disaster Recovery
-Key Lessons from Tohoku-

February, 2025
NPO Women's Eye

1. Self-introduction

- Born in Wakayama
- Master's degree, Human Security Program, Tokyo University
- 10 years in Financial Company
- Founded NPO for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in 2011

2011-2013 Support Women in Disaster-Affected Areas

2013-2015 Community empowerment, outreach for small business female owners

2015-2025 Grassroots Academy (Network, Leadership)

2019-2023 Japan Committee member, Women 20, Women 7

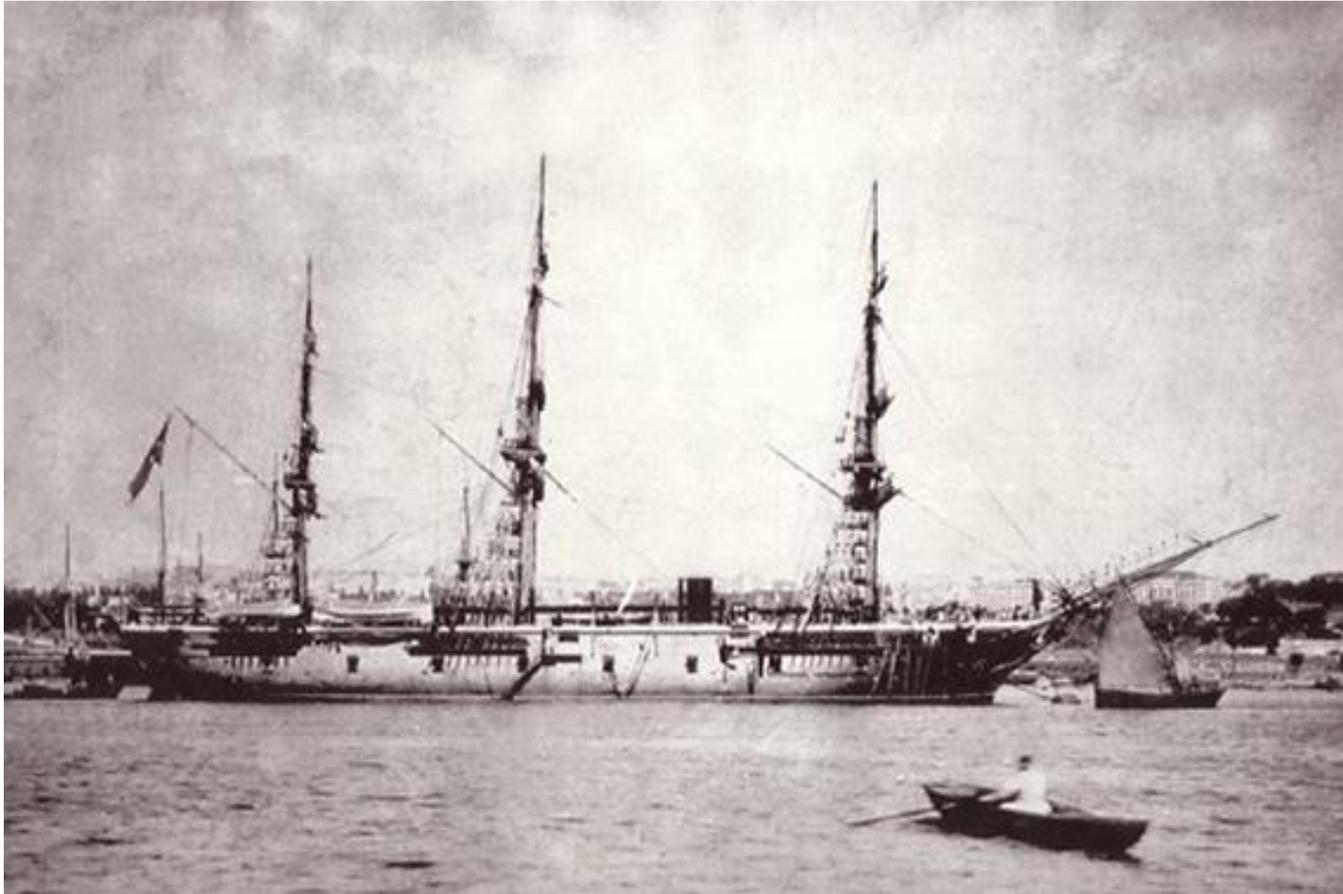
2020-2023 Single Mothers Research Projects

2023-2025 IT Empowerment for Local Women



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NPO Women's Eye

2. Ertuğrul: A symbol of Japan-Türkiye friendship 135 Years Ago in Wakayama, Japan



- In 1890, Japan and Türkiye's long-standing friendship began when Japanese residents rescued the Ottoman warship Ertuğrul after it ran aground off Wakayama's coast.
- The poor fishing village residents provided food, clothing, and care, helping 69 survivors return home safely.

3. Message for Earthquake Recovery in Rural Türkiye

- The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake devastated Tohoku. For 14 years, Women's Eye has seen firsthand the vital role women play in rebuilding communities.
- Amid the disaster, many women shifted from receiving aid to leading their communities. Working together, they created new livelihoods with their own hands and rebuilt their lives.
- We believe that in Türkiye's earthquake recovery, too, the strength of women will be a driving force in revitalizing communities. True recovery is not just reconstructing infrastructure but restoring people's lives and hearts.
- We hope our experiences in Tohoku help in some way. We sincerely wish for you to harness the strengths of your communities, and build a new future together.
- Earthquakes bring unimaginable loss, but also they create opportunities for new possibilities. We wholeheartedly stand with you on your journey of challenge and resilience.

4. Challenges Faced in Disaster Recovery

1. Difficulties in Securing Funds:

High barriers to bank loans; financial institutions may become dysfunctional in disaster-affected areas.

2. Loss of Sales Channels:

Shrinking local markets, disrupted distribution networks, and lack of expertise in online sales.

3. Increased Care Burden:

Heavier household caregiving responsibilities limit the time available for business operations.

4. Mental Health and Isolation:

Struggles to maintain motivation for business continuity and lack of support networks.

5. Challenges in Coordination with Government and Support Organizations:

Limited access to information on support programs and complex application procedures.

5. Women's Eye's Initiatives:

Outreach and expert advice for women small business owners



- Women business owners were often too busy to access support information. However, those who received expert guidance significantly improved their branding, product development, and pricing, leading to businesses stronger than before the disaster.
- On the other hand, women running small businesses faced challenges such as labor shortages, inadequate record-keeping of daily sales and accounting, pricing issues, and a lack of skills in e-commerce and social media.

5. Women's Eye's Initiatives

Grassroots Academy Tohoku Network and Leadership



- Launched as a pre-event for the 3rd UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015. Since then, Grassroots Academy Tohoku -3 days program- has been held regularly for 13 times.
- It is a learning and networking platform for women entrepreneurs and community leaders to share each other's real experiences, build connections beyond regional boundaries, seek advice, gain new insights to take back to their communities, and gain confidence in their work and beliefs.

5. Women's Eye's Initiatives

IT Empowerment 3 months digital training



As one solution to address disparities in working conditions, wages, and employment opportunities between women in rural areas and those in urban centers, we provide intensive training in essential digital skills for the future. Many women—whether business owners, employees, part-time workers, or job seekers—face significant challenges, such as not having personal access to a laptop compared to their urban or male counterparts, a lack of childcare services, low wages that make expensive training unaffordable, and limited or no Wi-Fi access. These challenges are further exacerbated by the slow progress of digital transformation (DX) in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas, resulting in limited opportunities for women to utilize digital skills in the past.

6. Story of Female Entrepreneur: Tamiko Abe



- Tamiko (49) lost her home, fishing worksite, and father-in-law to the tsunami.
- Tamiko was traumatized by seeing her elderly neighbor swept away by the tsunami and felt guilty for not saving her.
- In 2012, she started an online business selling local seafood sets.
- In rural Japan, traditional gender roles persist: men work outside, while women manage the home and children.
- Faced exclusion and pressure from the community and male business owners.
- She persevered for 13 years and became a leading female entrepreneur in Tohoku.

7. Story of Female Entrepreneur: Tamiko's EC Business

<EC> Tamiko's recommended local seafood assortment and processed products for online sales



<Experience Program>
Aquaculture Fishery
tour (1.5h)



<Experience Program>
Seaweed Workshop
(1.5h)



8. Tamiko's Personal Transformation



	Before the Disaster	After the Disaster
Self-Identity	Housewife	Business owner
Attitude	Submissive approach to work and life, such as obeying what husband says	Runs her business based on her own decisions
Network	PTA, local Buddhist women's group, relatives—no other opportunities to meet new people	Volunteers from outside the town, customers from all over Japan and abroad, business partners
Skills	None	Computer skills, Website, Facebook, writing promotional content
Responsibilities	Assisted in her husband's aquaculture business (oysters, scallops, wakame, sea squirts, etc.) Household chores, childcare	Business revenue management, applying for grants and subsidies, employing three staff members, sales

9. Challenges Unique to Women: What Tamiko Faced?



1. Barriers to Securing Funds

- Only had a bank account in her husband's name
- Business track record existed only under her husband's name
- Unable to secure a loan from the bank

2. Balancing Family and Work

- Housework and childcare were her responsibilities.
- However, as the business grew busier, husband began to support her with both the business and household chores.

3. Resistance from Local Business Owners

- "How dare a woman interfere in the male-dominated fishing industry?"
- "A woman shouldn't be eligible for grants."

4. Cold Stares from the Local Community

- "A woman shouldn't be doing something so conspicuous."

5. Lack of Networks

10. What Was Helpful to Sustain Her Business?

1. Local Chamber of Commerce Support

- Provided hands-on guidance to Tamiko, who had never written a business plan or budget before. Revising the documents until she secured a loan on her third attempt.

2. Expert Consultation Through NPO Outreach

- A business consultant found pricing issues—missing management costs led to losses on best-sellers. The more they sold, the more they lost. She adjusted pricing to ensure profitability.

3. Expert Consultation Using Government Grants

- A product development expert helped her create the "Seaweed Workshop," which repurposes leftover seaweed into furikake (seasoned seaweed flakes).

4. Serving on Key Committees in Town

- Appointed to the International ASC Committee for oysters, she learned about certification and applied it to her business. This recognition led to her selection for other key committees and board positions.
- With external organizers managing the committee, traditional hierarchies were disrupted, creating a more inclusive environment and raising women's participation to 30%.

5. Building Networks

- To envision her community's future from a women's perspective, she visited a disaster-hit area 10 years after with local women. Seeing older women run businesses happily, she realized that collaborating made the journey more enjoyable and sustainable than working alone.

11. A message from Tamiko to Women Business Owners in Türkiye



If you don't give up, your wishes will come true