

Late this summer, JICA hosted an insightful training seminar for women entrepreneurs and senior civil servants from Africa to encourage women leadership and entrepreneurship in their home countries. With participants from Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, South Sudan and the JICA USA Office, the course provided a unique opportunity for the participants from different ethnic backgrounds to learn from each other and openly discuss their specific country challenges in promoting women entrepreneurship in their respective countries.

Across Africa, much like the rest of the world, women face unique challenges in starting and growing their businesses. While sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where women are more likely than men to be entrepreneurs, women in Africa still face enormous barriers like not having access to loans and credit from commercial banks due to low start-up capital and little or no collateral security. These factors not only hinder women from establishing their business ventures, but it also prevents them from expanding their already successful business models. Additionally, these women's entrepreneurial



Africa-Japan Business Women Exchange participants meet with a female social entrepreneur in Japan

opportunities are complicated further by administrative, ethnic and patriarchal social structures that make it difficult for them to cultivate business networks and identify appropriate business mentors.

In taking on these challenges, the training seminar featured expert lectures, guest presentations, group assignments and site visits to teach the participants about Japan's ongoing efforts to empower women entrepreneurs, both domestically and abroad. Beginning with a comprehensive overview of Japan's business climate and workplace policies, the course provided an opportunity for civil servants from Africa to learn about the tactics adopted by the Government of Japan to enhance women's workplace participation in Japan. With the need to increase women in the workforce to alleviate problems caused by Japan's aging society, the lecturers shared various workplace policies that Japan adopted to not only recruit, but also retain, women in the labor force throughout their childbearing years. In addition to workplace reforms, the lecturers highlighted ongoing efforts to increase the ratio of women in leadership, as well as efforts to combat societal gender norms to reduce women's disproportionate burden of unpaid work at home.

As part of the course, the participants also met with the Deputy Mayor of Yokohama to learn about local workplace reforms to empower women-owned businesses. Formally welcoming the seminar participants to Yokohama, the Deputy Mayor also shared his desire to strengthen the bond between the people of Yokohama and the people of Africa by hosting global platforms like the Tokyo International Conference of Africa's Development (TICAD) and engaging in smaller cultural exchanges. While thanking the participants for visiting Yokohama, the Deputy Mayor expressed his belief that such exchanges provide an invaluable opportunity not only for the program participants, but also for the people of Yokohama, to exchange opinions, deepen cultural awareness and learn about different work styles.

In addition to formal meetings with government officials, the program participants also interacted directly with female social entrepreneurs in Japan to learn about their innovative business strategies and learn from their unique experiences navigating their own business challenges.

During one of the site visits, course participants met Kiyoko Ojima, a female social entrepreneur, who runs a vegetable field in Fujisawa City. Explaining how she engages in sustainable farming practices by not using chemical pesticides, Ojima also shared that she is working to give back to her community by using her vegetable farm to teach her innovative technique to people in Japan who are unemployed or homeless. By building up farming skillsets for those less fortunate, Ojima stated she hopes her guidance will not only help them find employment, but more importantly, help boost their confidence and sense of self-worth.



JICA trainees tour a vegetable farm run by a woman who has started her own sustainable, social business

The training seminar ended with program participants attending a TICAD7 side-event focused on exploring the role that social entrepreneurship can play in tackling gender challenges in Africa. The event called, [*Unleashing the Power of Women and Girls in Africa*](#)¹, brought in social entrepreneurs from Africa and Japan to discuss how their businesses work to unlock the potential of women and girls, thereby spurring job creation and overall economic growth in their respective countries.

By participating in JICA's Africa-Japan Business Women Exchange, seminar participants returned home with new ideas for how to build up their social businesses and how to emulate good policies to further empower women-owned businesses in their home countries. Additionally, through candid conversations with women entrepreneurs in Japan, the participants left with not only expanded business networks and a strong sense of comradery with these women, but also a regained sense of enthusiasm to strengthen women's entrepreneurship in Africa through the kind friendship extended by the people of Japan.

¹ A summary of this event can be found here: https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2019/c8h0vm0000f5zxl-att/20190912_01_11.pdf