

**ROLES OF WOMEN IN FISHERIES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN JAPAN:  
THROUGH EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Kumi SOEJIMA, Graduate School of Biosphere Sciences, Hiroshima University, Japan,  
qmiii@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

Masahiro YAMAO, Professor, Biosphere Sciences, Hiroshima University, Japan,  
yamao@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

Izumi YANO, Associate Professor, Biosphere Sciences, Hiroshima University, Japan,  
yanoizm@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

**ABSTRACT**

Women in fishing communities must work very hard on fishing and marketing activities together with housekeeping and child-care. However, their social and economic status is vulnerable. Women are often excluded from any process of decision-making as regards fisheries management and community development. They are not usually allowed to join the membership of a fishery cooperative association (FCA), because of the tight framework of fishing rights. Small-scale enterprises established by women are increasing in number, as fishery households have recently been disadvantaged in economic terms because of the decrease of fishery resources and the severe decline in fish prices. Women's groups are involved in the processing of under utilized fishery resources. Their activity is regarded as local-resource-based businesses of an appropriate scale. Women's entrepreneurship is an additional income source to fishery households, and provides women with job opportunities. A large number of women's groups have increasingly appeared all over the country. The government supports these groups, and prepares women's empowerment programs that enhance levels of women's capacity building, thereby reducing the gender-related difference presently existing in fishing communities. This paper seeks to evaluate the impact of women's entrepreneurship on local communities through a case study in Japan. The results of the analysis will suggest how government should solve peculiar gender problems in fishing communities, and re-build the present framework of policy for fishery and community development.

**Keywords:** women's role in fishing community, gender relationship, fish processing, entrepreneurship, empowerment, community development

**INTRODUCTION**

Although women in Japanese fishing communities are deeply involved in fishery related activities including, processing and selling their products, their social and economic positions are very low, the Fisheries Census does not count the women involved in processing and selling as "fishers". They are not usually allowed to become full-scale members of a fishery cooperative association (FCA). Actually, however, the Fishery Cooperative Association Law defines full-scale members as those fishers "who have their residence within the jurisdictional area of the cooperative and manage or engage in fisheries for the period of more than 90 to 120 days a year as determined by the articles of incorporation [4]." Therefore, any fishery worker who qualifies in the working period and lives in the community of the FCA can legally obtain full-scale membership, regardless of sex or type of job, "as engaged in fisheries" means not only engaged in the sea work but also engaged in the land work.

No accurate figure for the scale of female full-scale members to all is available. It is reported that in 1998, the female members were only 16,814, compared with the male membership of 273,272. The female members accounted for 6% of the total members.

The reasons of the limited number of the female full-scale membership of an FCA are as follows:

- 1) The “One member one family” principle, remains deep-rooted in fishing communities
- 2) The FCA ties up membership with the possession of fishing rights
- 3) An ambiguous qualification standard for the full-scale membership, which differs in each FCA
- 4) Total amount of paid-in share capital and membership fee to the FCA, and so on.

In these circumstances, women’s entrepreneurship is increasing to change this status. There are at least 63 women’s entrepreneurship groups in fishing communities in Japan. Despite no statistical data, it can be guessed that there are more women’s entrepreneurship groups in fishing communities. Most of them are engaged in processing and selling locally. The entrepreneurial activity of women in fishing communities can be expected to matter a great deal in the following three points. Firstly, it will raise their economic status with social appreciation. Secondly, the women can be empowered by taking part in any economic activities. Thirdly, it can rectify the inequality of gender that still remains in the fishing communities.

As this movement of women in fishing communities’ entrepreneurship has just started to be widely noticed, there have been not many studies in Japan on the role of women in fishing communities or their entrepreneurship.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the following two points through a case study at Hikoshima village, Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi Prefecture. The first point is to identify the process towards entrepreneurship development through the empowerment of women’s groups of the fishery cooperative association. The second is to identify the impact of women’s entrepreneurship on local communities. Women’s group at Hikoshima village has developed their activities, by satisfying the needs of all the members.

## **OUTLINE OF FISHERY IN HIKOSHIMA VILLAGE**

A field survey was conducted in Hikoshima village, being located at the western end of Honsyu in Japan and faces towards the Japan Sea (Fig.1).

The number of fishers in the Census is 82 people. The full-scale members of Hikoshima FCA consist of 52 male, and 32 females (2003); associate members are 27 male only (2003) (Table I). The average age of FCA members is about 52 years old. Although this is relatively younger than the average age in other areas, the number of fishing people has decreased gradually.

Fishery is a main industry in Hikoshima village. There are 47 establishments, among which 43 use a small trawl nets (91%, 1998). Mechanization has advanced for the recent decade; most small trawl net boats have GPS equipment and only one fisherman operates most of the fishery establishments. As their fishing ground experiences rough weather during the winter, the fishermen cannot go fishing on many days. Their incomes are very small during the winter. They engage in any other work. Seaweed aquaculture started about 20 years ago. Eleven young fishermen work in seaweed aquaculture from October 1 to the middle of April (2002) and ten fishermen started oyster culture in 2001.

The great majority of catch in Hikoshima is miscellaneous fish, varying widely in size and type. It’s difficult to sell these fish at the wholesale market, because such markets tend to avoid the miscellaneous fish. Therefore, the women of fishery household need to find their own outlets to sell the majority of the catch to customers.



Fig.1 map of Hikoshima village

Table I. An overview of fisheries in Hikoshima village

Population (2000)	male:15,627 female:17,866
Number of FCA full-scale members (2003)	male:52 female:32
Number of FCA associate members (2003)	male:27 female:0
Main type of fishery	small trawl net (91%)
Main catches	miscellaneous fish

Source: fishery census, 1998 (the Fishery Agency),  
Annual report of Hikoshima FCA, 2003,  
Interviews in 2002.

## WOMEN IN FISHERY

### The work of the Women

In Hikoshima, fishery women need to sell their husband's catch directly to customers at the corner of the wholesale market not involving any intermediaries.

They land and sort the catch together with their husbands at the port at around 1:30AM and carry the catch to the wholesale market in their trucks (Table II). Customers start coming to their sales corner at 2:30AM. They are mainly local fish retailers and local Japanese restaurants. Tourists start visiting at 8:00AM. The market value of the miscellaneous fish is very low. Therefore, women need to add value to their catches by dressing and mincing. Sales are according to the women's bargaining power and processing skills. For instance, lizardfish that is most often captured in Hikoshima are low in value,

being 1,000-1,500 yen per ten kg box. However, minced lizardfish is 100 yen per 100g, being about 10 times or more than the raw fish.

Women's sales are about 30,000-40,000 yen per day on average. The number of fishing and selling days is 20 per month in summer, 5-6 days per month in winter, and only 5 days during January and February.

Table II. Current aspects of women's sales

Working hours	1:30AM~12:00PM
Sales days	20days (summer) 10days (winter) 5days (Jan.Feb.)
Sale average	30,000yen/day

Source: Interviews in 2002.

### Problem of Women Labor and Selling Fish

There are three problems in women's work in Hikoshima. Firstly, they are overworked, and their sleeping time is very short being four hours on average. They have to sell fishery products at markets for a long time, and then they must do the housekeeping.

Secondly, they are now faced with a severe decline of catch, the fall in fish prices and the decrease of customers year by year. It is estimated that the fishery income at this moment has fallen by 60% to 1975 [5]. The women spend half of their income on maintaining the fishing boat and paying the cost for fishing operations. Besides selling fish, a large number of the women are engaged in many kinds of part-time work.

However, women in Hikoshima find it difficult to find work opportunities on a part-time basis. They do not have much extra time after selling fish and housekeeping. This is a restriction on working hours. Meanwhile, women must go to market for selling on many days during the summer, while they work a only few days during the winter. Moreover, the women cannot fix a schedule for part-time jobs because of the uncertainty of fishing operations, depending on the weather. Of course, women must interrupt their work (e.g. housekeeping etc.) and stand by at the port when their husbands come back. They should assist in unloading the catch. Because of these restrictions, women in Hikoshima have endured uncomfortable working conditions and lower wage levels. They are often employed on a part-time basis by fish processing companies that can arrange flexible operations, corresponding with the women's time availability and working condition.

Thirdly, women have the regulations of work in the wholesale market in the following four points. Firstly, because of the fact that not many local consumers come early in the morning, women in Hikoshima must begin to sell their fishes to fish dealers, retailers and processors at the beginning of the auction. It is also too early for local consumers to come shopping at the market. Secondly, fishing operations and marketing in Hikoshima used to take a day off on Saturday, to proceed fishery business for family members. However, in 2002, the wholesale market decided to conduct business on Saturday and to close on Wednesday, so that the wholesale market could attract more tourists. As a result, the schedule of fishing operations and marketing had to be adjusted to the day the wholesale market was closed. However, the

amount of sales did not increase although the number of tourists increased, normally the tourists do not buy raw fish. Thirdly, it is not easy for women in Hikoshima to participate in community activities, because they do not have much time to do so. Fourthly, there is a problem of the unclear future of human resource for the fish sales. After aged mothers and the grandmothers retire from fish selling, who sells the unmarried fishermen's catches? Through their longtime experience women have advanced techniques like processing and marketing. The fish sales is not work that everyone can manage easily.

### **THE WOMEN'S GROUP FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

#### **The Activities of the Women's Group of FCA**

Although women's marketing activities are individual businesses, they are regulated by the rules of the Women's Group of Hikoshima Fishery Cooperative Association (WG). Thirty-nine out of 43 WG's members are selling their catches. There are 6-7 shelves in one line: they have nine lines in the sales corner in the Karato wholesale market, located in Shimonoseki city. The disposition of shelves is not impartial, as one faces the passage while the other is placed at the bottom end. The shelves facing the passage are more advantageous for sales. To solve such unfairness among members, they rotate shelves everyday. Moreover, the members alternate the shelf of the person with an especially bad sale to the shelf that faces the passage. When one does not have the items for the order from a customer, another lends the items to her. There is cooperation as well as personal competition among them.

The WG not only supports women's marketing activities but also performs many other activities (Table III). The first activity is "creating side income opportunities". In 1987, the WG negotiated with a local food company to provide part-time job opportunities for them.

The second one is the efforts of "studying keeping accounts" in the 1990s. In fact, they tried to solve unclear and/or questionable matters in accounts by themselves, and they also studied together by inviting lecturers. At present, most of the women are able to keep accounts by themselves.

Thirdly, since 1995 they have made much effort to revitalize the fishing community in many ways. The WG respects local culture and traditions, and find skillful persons in many fields. It published a booklet in 1996. Furthermore, eleven members formed a processing group, and held cooking classes and operated a morning market in the agricultural areas.

Fourthly, WG has improved the women's status. They could not participate in the FCA's activity and organization, because they were not full-scale member of FCA.

To become full-scale member, anyone who is practically engaged in fisheries and having full-scale fishing rights as "fishing people" may be considered. Anyone who is engaged in only processing or selling is not considered as "fishing people" in Japan. Mostly, a man represents his family, and becomes a full-scale member of the FCA. After 1995, women began to request the FCA to be able to join with full-scale membership of the FCA. The WG often proposed at general meetings that women should attain the qualification of full-scale membership. A few members opposed the proposal; the WG members repeatedly solicited male members of the FCA. Finally, the proposal was approved by all members of FCA in 2000. Generally speaking, a great obstacle for women to become a full-scale member is that they should pay the large amount of paid-in share capital. FCA in Hikoshima solved this problem by creating different two types of paid-in share capital. Members have to pay 860,000 yen per head of household (mostly men). If their wives wish to be full-scale members, they will pay 140,000 yen per head. Finally, in 2001, three women were elected as committee members of the FCA that has ten committee members. It can be said that the achievement of women's full-scale membership of FCA raises their social evaluation.

The WG’s activities cover a very wide range, including both individual economic benefits and the social welfare of the local community. This means that they were empowered through these activities that are reciprocally interlocked.

Table III. Activities of WG

1987	The creating of side income opportunity
Early 1990s	Study keeping accounts themselves
Lately 1900s	The efforts of developing their community -digging up local cultures and skills -cooking lectures and the morning markets in agricultural areas
2000	The efforts for improving the women status for the better -becoming full-scale membership of FCA -gaining decision making right

Source: Interviews in 2002 and community’ booklet in Hikoshima, 1996.

**The Role of the WG**

The WG has the following four roles. Firstly, the WG contributes to solving the various problems that fishery households face. Secondly, the WG represents those women who are engaged in fishery. Thirdly, the WG may enable involvement in the solution of both fishery and community problems. Fourthly, women have gained empowerment through the activities of the WG. Women derived a great incentive to start new businesses from the WG.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP**  
**The Motives and Processes of the Entrepreneurship**

“Kamon Warf (KW)”, a private enterprise equipped with many gift counters and restaurants using local marine products, was opened up in Shimonoseki city in 1999. The KW requested the WG to join them. They could not respond to this request at first, because of the shortage of funds. In 2001, the leader of WG asked the central and prefecture governments for financial support, appealing with the results and outcomes of their activities that had been conducted so far. The prefecture and city governments could provide subsidies to open the WG to the KW.

Taking this opportunity, the leader asked forty-eight WG members to join in a women’s entrepreneurship group (2001). At first, the leader appealed to them to join this business. However, only the leader and one member were willing to find share capital and participate in the planning. Most members were reluctant to join any business. Then, the leader proposed three types of participation. Type I is to find share capital, and join in shop operation. This type is fully responsible in an entrepreneurship group by sharing capital. Type II is to join in the shop operation without finding share capital. Type III is to help only occasional activities (e.g. festivals)(Table IV). They can choose any type of participation according to their own conditions and will. They created their own flexible participation system. In 2002, they organized a

women’s entrepreneurship group named “Hikoshima Sea Ladies (HSL)”, and opened a deep fried fish store in KW.

Table IV. System of the HSL

			Type of participation		
			Type I	Type II	Type III
involvement					
Capital sharing			○	×	×
Join in shop operation			○	○	×
Help occasional activities ( eg.festival)			○	○	○
No.	female	2004	4	8	0
		2002	3	1	7
	male	2004	3	1	0
		2002	0	2	0

Source: Interviews in 2002 and 2004.

**The Current Activity Status of HSL**

Currently the HSL consists of seven members (including three men) that belong to type I, and nine members (including a man) are of type II (2004) (Table IV). The HSL purchases materials of fried fish mainly from the WG. The materials are underutilized miscellaneous fish caught by small-scale trawlers, whose members have difficulty in marketing. As the main customers of HSL are tourists, sales have a large gap between the peak and off-season. The HSL’s business is quite unstable. Business hours of HSL are from 10:00 to 18:00. Also the members of the HSL must work at the wholesale market from 1:30 AM to 12:00 noon, which makes them overworked. The time wage is 500 yen, and the income of the member comes to about 60,000-80, 000 yen per month (Table V).

**The Role of HSL**

The HSL has the following four roles (cf. Table V). Firstly, it processes low-value miscellaneous fish into deep fried products and sells them to tourists. Secondly, the HSL generates a side income opportunity. Its members prefer to increase the amount of the wage that they can receive rather than expanding the HSL’s profit. Thirdly, the HSL changes the gender relationship in fishery households and in the local community. When wives go to work at the HSL shop, some husbands help to do the housekeeping work. Of course, in Hikoshima, housekeeping is still considered as a woman’s task. Such a minor change may be a symptom that the traditional gender relationship has slightly changed. Fourthly, the HSL becomes a new leader in revitalizing the local economy. The HSL is an important customer who buys miscellaneous fish from the members of the WG. The HSL is contributing to a reduction in the women’s heavy work for selling and to ensure the income of the fishery households. The sale of local marine products is useful for attracting both tourists and local people to Hikoshima. As a whole, the HSL has greatly contributed to the development of the local economy.

Table V. The current activity status of the HSL (2004)

supplier	The members of women’s group of FCA in Hikoshima village
Main customer	tourists
Business hours	10:00~18:00
Number of selling members/day	2~3
payment	500yen/hour
Income of the member	60,000 ~80,000yen/month

Source: Interviews in 2004.

**PROCESS TOWARDS ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

It can be concluded that the WG’s organization and activities have successfully empowered women in Hikoshima and led them to entrepreneurship development. Women have tried to solve economic problems on an individual basis, by dressing underutilized miscellaneous fish and selling it. The WG provides training programs on bookkeeping for members, and generates a side income opportunity for household economies. They join the full-scale membership of the FCA. These activities will bring a further development of small-scale business in the next stage.

The WG’s activities enhance the social recognition of women’s role in the fishing community. As a result, it becomes easy for women to involve in whatever activity that benefits the women directly, and also to express their opinions. Such women’s activities have gradually, but steadily caused a change of gender relationship in the fishery households and in the fishing communities. Decisively, women and their entrepreneurship groups have become a new leader in fishing community development.

Under the present fishery policy in Japan, it is hard to scrap the old social structures that many fishing communities still persisted in. Consequently, it still prevents women in fishing communities from participation in the plans of their own community. This study shows a possibility of bottom-up approach to allow structural change of fishery societies by improving the women’s status.



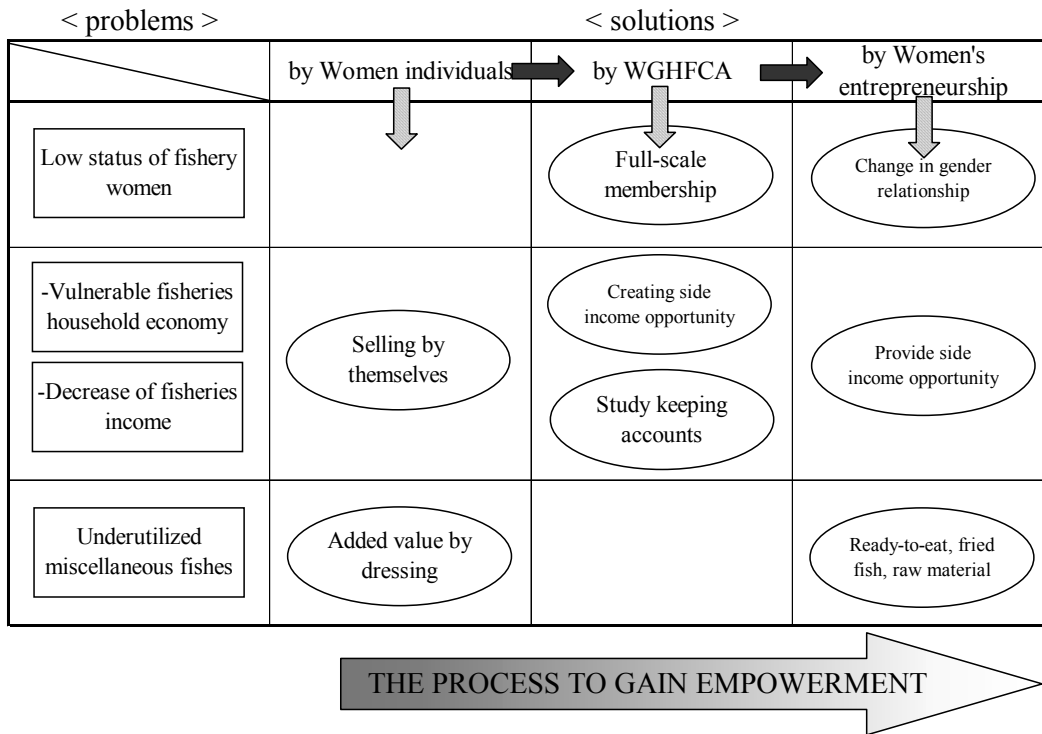


Fig.2 process to gain empowerment

**REFERENCES**

[1] Kumi SOEJIMA, Izumi YANO, 2004, Reevaluation of Women's Labor and Role of Their Group in the Coastal Fisheries Village – A Case of Hikoshima, City of Shimonoseki in Yamaguchi Prefecture-, *JOURNAL OF RURAL ECONOMICS*, 76 (3), ( in Japanese), in-printing.

[2] Natsuko Miki, 1999, Fishery Cooperative Association and Gender, *JOURNAL OF CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES*, 19 (2), pp.41-47, ( in Japanese).

[3] N.Miki et al., 2001, WOMEN IN FISHERIES IN ASIA, *Global Symposium on WOMEN IN FISHERIES*, pp.21-48.

[4] THE FISHERIES COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION LAW, translated by Kanagawa International Fisheries Training Centre Japan International Cooperation Agency.

[5] Toyota Department of Agricultural (Shimonoseki office), 2000, *annual report*, ( in Japanese).