

## **Braving the Sea: The Amasan (Women Divers) of the Yahataura Fishing Community, Iki Island, Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan.**

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### **Abstract**

Ama, or amasan which literally means “sea person”, are women and men divers who use rapid diving techniques without using scuba gear or compressed air. Honed by years of experience, the ama are professional divers whose diving prowess depends largely on their lung capacity, diving speed, resistance to cold, intuition for finding their target organisms and determination to succeed. Ama dive for seaweed, shellfish, sea urchin, lobster, sea cucumber, oyster, octopus and abalone, this last being the most preferred catch. Despite their significant contribution to the fishing industry, the ama remain invisible and marginalised.

Using participant observation, focus group discussion and key informant interviews, the present study provides a picture of the women ama in the fishing village of Yahataura, Iki Island, Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan. Female divers’ access to and control over resources, activities and time allocation, and access to administrative decision-making processes were examined in relation to that of male fishers. The results of the study substantiate the important role of women in the fishing communities and affirm the long standing social problem of their low status in society, especially compared to that of men. Some ways to improve their social standing in the community are suggested.

### **Introduction**

Having been in existence for 2,000 years, ama (or amasan), which literally means “sea person,” are men and women divers who use high-speed diving techniques but without scuba gear or compressed air. Honed by years of experience, ama are professional divers whose diving prowess depends largely on the lung capacity, diving speed, resistance to cold, intuition for finding their catch and determination to succeed.

The term ama was first used in the 12<sup>th</sup> century to mean “fisherman,” regardless of sex as both men and women sourced their income from the sea. The numbers of male and female ama found vary with location. Data from Toshifumi’s (1989) nationwide survey of 774 fisheries cooperatives (with a response rate of 67% from 34 prefectures) showed that Chiba, Mie and Nagasaki had the greatest number of amasan numbering 3,472, 3,378 and 3,337, respectively (Table 1). Of these prefectures, Mie (3,063), Chiba (1,743), Nagasaki (553) and Iwate (550) had

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the greatest numbers of women divers. Since ancient times, Bouchy (1999) found that, in some regions of Japan, women were the only divers. In some places, ama were mobile, moving from west to east along the Japanese coastline. As the male ama found other jobs in fishing, women divers were left to do most of the diving. Over the years, the word, ama, became associated with women divers.

**Table 1.** Distribution of ama, 1985 (Toshifumi 1989).

<b>Prefecture</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>
Hokkaido	0	2	2
Aomori	130	0	130
Iwate	535	550	1,085
Miyagi	170	70	240
Akita	92	0	92
Fukushima	231	0	231
Ibaraki	99	0	99
Chiba	1,729	1,743	3,472
Tokyo	395	30	425
Kanagawa	286	0	286
Niigata	114	51	165
Toyama	8	0	8
Ishigawa	8	278	286
Fukui	223	486	709
Shizuoka	186	493	679
Aichi	5	0	5
Mie	345	3,063	3,378
Wakayama	859	126	985
Kyoto	14	0	14
Hyogo	74	0	74
Tottori	13	40	53
Shimane	116	30	146
Yamaguchi	737	239	976
Tokushima	658	195	853
Ehime	207	30	237
Kochi	192	1	193
Fukuoka	484	160	644
Saga	191	11	202
Nagasaki	2,784	553	3,337
Oita	175	13	188
Kumamoto	88	0	88
Miyasaki	24	0	24
Kagoshima	448	0	448
Okinawa	76	0	76
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,696</b>	<b>8,164</b>	<b>19,824</b>

Dressed in torso-covering wetsuits, ama dive for seaweeds, shellfish, sea urchins, lobster, sea cucumber, shellfish, oyster, octopus and abalone. Abalone are the preferred catch because they are one of the most prized seafoods. The average price for a kg of abalone is nearly 8,000 yen (almost US\$70 on 2011 exchange rates).

Abalone features in the cultural history of Japan as much more than a choice seafood. It used to be served to the Emperor, other high ranking members of the court (Bouchy, 1999) and at Ise Shrine.

Our interest in ama stems initially from the image that they project to outsiders, in contrast to geisha stereotypes or the widely held image of Japanese feminine beauty and behaviour as quiet, slim, shy, demure, self-effacing, and pale. But as we investigated the ama through the works of writers, Japanese and foreign, we were struck by the many different pictures that have been painted of ama. Some are complementary, and some are derogatory. In an apparent contradiction, women ama are highly regarded for their professional diving skill in male-dominated fishing communities but they are accorded lower social status than men as ama diving has been perceived as a job only the poor and uneducated would choose. The amas' contributions to Japanese society and culture have remained hidden and unacknowledged.

For a developed country that promotes gender equity, the lower status of ama cannot be ignored. However, in the Japanese fishing sector women are highly marginalised and the realisation of their dreams and quest for social justice is elusive. One manifestation is the employment data which shows that women's labour participation is lower than that of men. In 2005, women's participation was highest in the service (or tertiary) industry at 46%, followed by agriculture, forestry and fisheries (or primary industries) at 41% and manufacturing (or secondary industries) at 26% (Table 2). In fisheries, while men's participation rate was 84%, women's (self-employed and hired) was 16% only (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2005). Women's participation in many fisheries-related activities could not be presented due to the absence of statistics.

**Table 2.** Employment by Industry and Gender, Japan, 2005 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2005).

Industry	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries	1,736	59	1,204	41	2,940
Manufacturing	14,454	74	5,044	26	19,498
Service	8,633	54	7,499	46	16,132

The present paper examines the situation of Women ama in Japan. The study was conducted in 2008.

## Materials and Methods

This paper presents ethnographic research using a feminist approach (Kabeer, 1994; Naples, 2003; Reinhartz, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Several different data gathering techniques were used, including key informant interviews, participant observation and focus group discussion, to obtain information on women's access to and control over resources, their work activities within and outside the household, the time allotted for household activities, their views on their work, and their problems and aspirations in life.

We carried out a documentary analysis to supplement the primary information obtained from the respondents. The key informants, selected based on their detailed knowledge of the amasan, were the head and staff of the Fisheries Cooperative Association (FCA) of Tobu where the amasan reside, the male boat operator who accompanied the ama to sea, the leader of the amasan group and the older women divers. Interviews with the head of the cooperative and the staff were done separately at the office of the cooperative over three consecutive days while those of the women divers were carried out in their houses, on the boat before and after diving, and at the fishing port itself. A female staff member of the cooperative, in charge of coordinating and facilitating all the activities of the ama, selected participants for focus group discussion based on the women divers' willingness, availability, position in the group and active participation in the cooperative's coordinated activities. The discussion was conducted exclusively with women divers to allow them to voice their opinions freely and spontaneously.

The FCA facilitated participant observation. To explore the village context, accommodation was arranged at an inn in the village. The FCA provided access to its office and facilitated direct observations of the fishers' fishing facilities and fishing-related activities and the operation of the cooperative, and participation in women divers' activities after diving. A tour of the cooperative's fishing ground was organised by the head of the cooperative to show the fishing boundary of the cooperative and the fishing ground allotted to the women divers. Examination of local abalone outlets, and talks on the prevailing demand and market prices of abalone, pollution problems, and the declining productivity of the sea confirmed the information already provided by the women divers. For firsthand experience with women divers at sea, a diving trip with a group of women divers who dived at a deeper fishing ground was arranged by the FCA on one of the diving days. This provided access to the detailed activities involved in the ama's diving; private conversations were thus enabled between the researcher and the subjects, although underwater observations were not made. An interview was also conducted with the male boat operator, covering his role and the diving skills and experiences of ama. Following the diving trip, the lead author helped in hauling and de-shelling sea urchin. A second, shorter trip was arranged by the FCA to observe another group of ama who dived at relatively shallower fishing grounds without the aid of a boat.

To explore activities the ama divers engage in during the diving season, we used a structured questionnaire to interview five married ama divers, with grown-up children, about their activities and time allocation. The information we obtained from these cases was validated by the ama diver participants in the focus group discussion and by staff of the FCA. Information on the activities of ama divers in the community was gathered from the records of the FCAs and validated by the ama diver leader and active ama divers of the cooperative.

We conducted the key informant interviews and the focus group discussion in Japanese and recorded them. The documents analysed included: socio-demographic and economic reports of Ashibe town; historical records on ama; the organisational structure and operations of the FCA; the annual reports of the FCA; and income of the ama from diving.

The site for this study was Yahataura village of Ashibe Town, Iki City, Nagasaki Prefecture. The study site was determined mainly by the willingness of the FCA to accommodate the research, the right timing for ama diving, the presence of 54 women divers, and their willingness to participate.

## Results

### *The study site*

Iki island is located in the Genkainada (sea) 67 km from Fukuoka City and 26 km from Yobuko-cho, Saga Prefecture. It is shaped like a turtle, running 17 km north to south and 15 km east to west (Fig. 1). Ashibe town is located northeast of the city of Iki and has a land area of 45.09 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for almost a third of the city's total land area. In 2004, the population was 10,544 persons, the average household size was 2.9 and the population density was 226.9 persons km<sup>-2</sup>. The average age was 47.6 years. At 52.9%, women formed the majority of the population.



**Fig. 1.** Approximate location of Iki City. Source: Wikipedia

Ashibe's economy was dominated by the service (tertiary) industry employing 2,195 persons or 52% of its productive labour force, followed by farming and fishing (primary) industry 1,235 persons or 29%, and manufacturing (secondary) 816 persons or 19% (Table 3). Women's labour participation rate was highest in the service sector (52%) and lowest in the manufacturing sector (29%). Their participation in farming, forestry and fisheries was 40%. While women comprised half of those employed in the farming sector (50%), they were only 18% of employees in the fisheries sector. This local pattern of women's employment mirrors the national pattern. No statistics were available on women's participation in the various fisheries.

**Table 3.** Employment by industry and gender, Ashibe Town, Nagasaki Prefecture, 2005  
(Statistics section, Iki City Hall, Nagasaki Prefecture 2005).

Industry	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Primary	742	60	493	40	1,235
Farming	428	50	424	50	852
Forestry	3	100	0	0	3
Fisheries	311	82	69	18	380
Secondary	580	71	236	29	816
Tertiary	1058	48	1137	52	2195

One of the sites of fish production in Ashibe is the Yahataura fishing village, noted for the presence of many women ama. Economic activities in the village were quite limited; the majority of people relied mainly on fishing. Farming was confined to a few people only. Because no factories were located in the area, many people, especially women, were forced to find employment in the nearby villages.

### *The Yahataura ama women divers*

#### The ama and the Tobu Fisheries Cooperative Association (FCA).

In Japan, fisheries activities are governed by the Japanese Fisheries Law and the Japanese Fisheries Cooperative Law. The Japanese Fisheries Law is the principal law that regulates fishery activities including granting fishery rights solely to the FCA operating in a particular fishing village. The Japanese Fisheries Cooperative Law provides the legal framework for the local FCA, which bears the responsibility for the village (Food and Agriculture Organization, undated). Engagement in any fishery activities requires membership in the FCA for that geographical area.

In Yahataura, the Tobu FCA bears responsibility of managing all fisheries-related activities. To engage in diving requires membership in the Tobu FCA. Thus, all ama women divers in Yahataura are registered members of the Tobu FCA. As members, they are given access to the fishery rights granted to the Tobu FCA by Nagasaki Prefecture, subject to a number of fishing regulations set by the prefecture and the FCA, and to services offered by the FCA including marketing of catch, credit, supply of inputs, insurance, warehouses, training, and resource enhancement. For marketing their catch, ama divers have to bring their catch to the FCA, after which the FCA weighs, records, packages, sells and credits the payment of the catch directly to the ama's account. In return, the FCA takes a commission from the sales. There is no employee-employer relationship between the divers and the Tobu FCA.

### The ama's origin, number and types.

No formal information is available on the origin of amasan in Yahataura. People believe that Yahataura amasan, who used to frequent Ise Shrine every year to pay homage to Ise, came from Ise of Mie prefecture (Miki, Natsuko, personal communication, August 11, 2008).

The 2004 Tobu FCA's report indicated a total of 54 female ama: 24 of the 54 were in their 50s; 17 in their 60s; 5 in their 40s; 4 in their 70s; 3 in their 30s; and 1 in his/her 20s. The number of ama, however, is projected to continue to decline (Table 4). The decline is attributed to the continuing out-migration of the younger people, lack of succession, and general population decline.

**Table 4.** Projected numbers of ama divers, 2004-2019, Tobu FCA (Tobu FCA, 2005).

Age Bracket	Year			
	2004	2009	2014	2019
20-29	1	0	0	0
30-39	3	3	1	0
40-49	5	4	3	3
50-59	24	13	5	4
60-69	17	22	24	13
70-79	4	12	17	22
<b>Total</b>	54	54	50	42

There were two types of ama in Yahataura: *cachido* and *funado*. The *cachido* (walking people) ama, easily distinguished by the light blue tubs they carry, relied on the services of boat men, who take them to a breakwater from where the ama swim to their fishing ground. The same boatmen collect the divers and return them to the fishing port. The *cachido* ama dive to a depth of 4-6 m to collect seashells. Each dive lasts for about 30 sec. After 30 sec of rest, they make their next dive. This dive pattern is repeated for about 5 hr day<sup>-1</sup>. The *cachido* tend to be older women. The oldest was 74 years old.

The *funado* ama, distinguished by their colourful tubs (orange, yellow, or pink), dive in groups, usually of 5 to 6 members, assisted by a boat operator. The men ama belonged to this group. *Funado* ama dive from an anchored boat to a deeper fishing depth (7 to 15 m). Each dive lasts for 30-40 sec, and, after 30 sec of rest, the next dive is undertaken.

### The ama's swimming suit and tools.

For body protection when diving, the Yahataura amasan do not wear the black rubber wet suits prescribed by cooperatives in other parts of Japan or the short pants or long white cloth used in the early days. Instead, they wear modern stylish tights of plain dark colours or coloured prints and tops of coloured cotton or polyethylene. Long necked and sleeved shirts are worn during cold months of autumn and winter. They have resisted wearing black wet suits to avoid over-harvesting resources. They argued that the warmth offered by the black rubber wet suits would encourage them to stay longer in the sea and so harvest more. The ama now wear a

facemask to protect their heads, goggles to enable them to see underwater, and a pair of flippers of varied colours to improve kick strength, ankle flexibility, body position and speed.

#### The ama's tools.

The ama women divers were equipped with simple traditional fishing tools. These were: the *hanzo*, a metal colour-coded floating tub used to contain their catch and also acting as a buoy marking the location of the diver; two *awabi okashi* metal scrapers, one short and one long, for picking abalone from crevices and crannies and cleaning them; *awabi ami*, a net bag for holding the abalone catch; *uni-tori*, a hand tool with a hooked tip for picking up sea urchins; *pumpo*, a plastic siphon hand-pump used to bail water out of the tub; *uki*, a float; and *omori*, an anchor tied to a rope.

#### The amas' goya.

In the past, an *amagoya* was a hut built along the coastline in which the ama rested and relaxed with their companions. For Yahataura ama, a shaded part of the boat served as their *amagoya* or social centre where they rested, ate, changed clothes before and after diving, laughed, told jokes, talked and gossiped. Subjects ranged from family and community concerns (bills, who is who, divorce, marriages) to beauty care, fashion and the spiraling prices of basic commodities including their swimming wear. The women considered the *amagoya* as their space, away from the demands of husband and family. That is where they felt a degree of freedom and independence.

#### Ama's diving.

For the ama divers, the most enjoyable time was that spent in the boat before and after diving. They typically made two diving trips a day. The first, for at most 3 hr (from 11:00 to 13:00, if harvest was good, and could be extended to 14:00 if the harvest had been scanty) to one fishing ground. The second trip, to a different fishing ground, lasted for 2 hr (from 2:30 or 3:00 PM to 5:00 PM). Total diving time was 5 hr day<sup>-1</sup>. The diving day normally ended at 17:00.

The ama divers follow certain practices before diving. Due in part to modern influences and cultural expectations of a Japanese woman, the women divers apply a heavy foundation cream to their faces to guard against the drying effects of saltwater and the scorching heat of the sun; they thus maintain unblemished facial skin. They prepare a gum as an ear plug to keep water out of their ear canals and to control pressure effects from diving to depth. For their health, the divers consume vitamins and medicines believed to protect them from hypothermia. Before donning them, each diver washes her goggles with a *ramin* leaf and sea water. Wearing their modern flippers, they climb down the boat's ladder, take their tub and gear and swim out to their chosen spot.

An ama diver then holds her breath and dives to the bottom, amid heavy thickets of vegetation, where the abalone and sea urchin feed. She searches the vegetation or rock crevices for abalone. Each dive takes about 30-40 sec, depending on the species sought. Prying abalone from the substrate takes longer than harvesting other species. Once one is seen, it is quickly cleansed with the scraper and placed in the net bag attached to the diver's waist. The ama swims to the surface unassisted, lets out a sharp whistle, readjusts her breathing, swims towards the bucket, empties the catch from her net and places it in the tub. Sea urchin and turbo shells are placed directly in the tub. In between a set of dives, ama divers rest for 3-4 min. When they feel that they have had enough for the first trip, they swim towards the boat. The boatman then hauls the catch onto the boat and places it in rectangular plastic boxes.

When the second diving trip is completed, the catch is sorted in the boat while the boatman motors back to port. The catch is unloaded with the help of men at the fisheries cooperative, weighed, recorded and, except for sea urchin, readied for marketing. After weighing, sea urchins are taken home for de-shelling and scooping out the gonads. These are then sold to local buyers. Processing sea urchin takes about 30 min or more, depending on the catch.

#### The ama's whistle sound (*isoboue*).

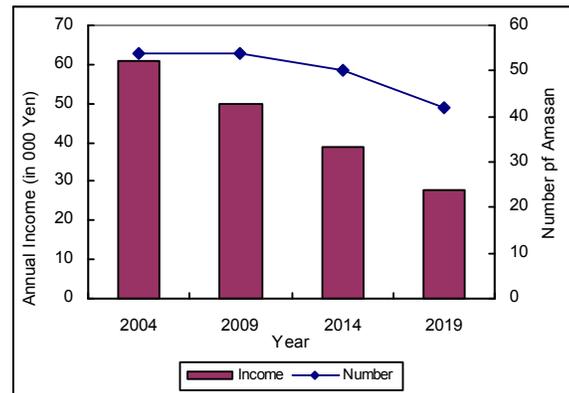
The Yahataura ama make a whistle sound, either short or long, that resembles that of a "deep sigh or gasp". The *isoboue* varies in sound. Some divers let out a short "ha", others a long "haay". To an outsider, it can be disturbing as it suggests pain. The ama explain they have to whistle to expel the pain in their lungs, to purge a feeling of heaviness, to gasp for air, and to re-adjust their breathing. At sea, the ama divers' whistle coming from beside their floating colourful tubs is distinctive.

#### The ama's income from fishing.

The income of ama women divers varies depending on factors including the diver's age, fishing experience and skill in diving, the weather, the species caught, and location of fishing ground. Records from the FCA showed the 2007 annual average per capita for a ama diver reached 61,086,603 yen or US\$ 52,329.97. The highest average annual income, 1,522,232 yen or US\$ 13,040.23 was earned by those in the age bracket 50-59 years. Many of these ama divers were *funado*, diving in the deeper fishing grounds.

Income from diving is dependent on the market prices of the species caught. In 2008, the average price of a kg of sea urchin was 8,000 yen (US\$ 68.53), abalone 6,300 yen (US\$ 53.97) and turban shells 600 yen (US\$ 5.14). On average, a woman diver's daily catch of sea urchin was 1.1 kg, abalone 0.5 kg and turban shells 3.8 kg. (Shimojoh, Akihiko, personal communication September 27, 2011). A day's income from diving, therefore, earned her an average of 14,230 yen (US\$ 121.90). That was higher than the average daily income of 6,400 yen (US\$ 54.82) she might have earned from a part-time job, derived from multiplying the maximum working hours of 8 in a day by the hourly part-time rate of 800 yen (US\$ 6.85). Information from Grenald (1998) and Kadri (2003) corroborated this conclusion. During the diving season, the amas' earned income was higher than that of their husbands.

Projected income, however, showed a declining pattern with the declining number of ama divers and their aging (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Trend in annual income and number of amasan, Tobu FCA, 2004-2019.

The women ama said, despite this high income, their daughters and daughters-in-law showed no interest in following their mother's or grandmother's footsteps (Grenald, 1998; Kadri, 2003; Shimamura, 2009). The risks and hazards they face when searching for their catch, the possibility of having their skin tanned by the sun, and the grime associated with diving have kept many young people from diving (Grenald, 1998; Kadri, 2003). Most of the male fishers in Yahataura did not engage in diving for a number of reasons: they already have their own fishing activity; they were not trained to be an ama; and women could withstand the cold better than men.

#### Ama's access to and control of resources.

Ama's access to and control of fishery resources was regulated by the male-dominated Tobu FCA which took charge of distributing its fishery rights (Types 1 and 2) to its members and regulating their fishing activities. The fishing ground assigned to the ama was the one granted with Type 1 fishery rights.

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<sup>a</sup> Type 1 fishery rights refer to those for fisheries: 1) for seaweeds, shellfish, crustaceans, and sedentary fin fish species, 2) employing fixed gear, e.g. traps and the like, 3) beach seines, non-motorized trawling (boat seine) and others that are relatively immobile or stationary gears on the fishing ground, and 4) those in inland-waters. Type 2 fishery rights are granted for aquaculture and are within waters governed by joint fishing rights. Type 2 fishery rights are of two types: special demarcated rights which relate to aquaculture using sea-ponds, raft nets and long-lines, exclusively given to FCAs, and demarcated rights granted for pearl culture and large-scale aquaculture projects involving the partition of sea inlets by dykes or nets, given to FCAs, individuals and private companies with the technical capability and required investment capital.

It had a rocky shore and reefs where shells such as turban shell, abalone and sea urchin would thrive and was located about 2 to 3 km offshore.

In the case of the *funado*, the identification of the fishing ground for the day was largely decided by the male boat operator, whose boat was equipped with a fish finder to measure depth and a Geographical Position System (GPS). The boat operator selects the ground based on tidal currents, water depth and the amasan's physical ability to collect the shellfish.

The fishing season for abalone, turban shells and sea urchin used to be from May to September each year. But to conserve the resources, the Cooperative decided to shorten the fishing season to four months, from June to September.

#### Ama's access to administrative/managerial decision-making positions.

The structural organisation of the Tobu FCA showed that women ama have no participation in administrative/managerial decision-making processes. The 5-member Board of Directors tasked to review the budget, policies and programmes of the cooperative was all male and so were the three committees created to examine the qualifications of members of the FCA, investigate fisheries-related concerns, the Executive Directorship of the FCA in-charge of implementing the policies of the FCA, and maintain the welfare and sustainability of the cooperative.

When asked why no women ama were in managerial positions, the head of the Cooperative responded that "the women are noisy. They talk a lot. Better leave things to men. They (the ama divers) have their own group. It is enough." This is one way of saying that the managerial positions are not for women, a reflection of the traditional idea of women as mothers and wives while men are breadwinners and leaders, concepts deeply ingrained in the minds of Japanese women and men (Hendry, 2003; Morley, 1999; Shinotsuka, 1995, all cited in Kitamura, 2008).

The core staff of 13, 6 males and 7 females, who assisted the Executive Director in the FCA's operations were young college graduates and they appeared to have no ambition of becoming an ama. Most female staff were assigned to such less physically strenuous tasks as finance and recording of daily catch and fish prices. The males were involved in weighing the catch, ice-making and refrigeration, fish culture, and transporting the catch.

#### Ama's activities and time allocation.

In general, ama's activities are divided into three spheres: household; diving; and community. Information on the household and diving activities was gathered from the five ama interviewed and pertained only to activities during the season for harvesting abalone, sea urchin and turbo shells. Community activities were obtained from the FCA's annual report and validated with ama.

### ***Household activities***

The harvest season for abalone, turban shells and sea urchin keeps an ama busy. She starts her day at 05:00, doing laundry, preparing breakfast and lunch for the whole household, cleaning the house and gearing up for her diving. Those activities take an average of 4 hr. When ready, she then leaves for the fishing port, boards the boat, waits for her other companions and sets out to sea to dive at around 10:00 AM. When diving and marketing of the catch are done, the ama hurries back to the house to wash her swim wear, buy groceries, and prepare dinner while getting the bath ready for her husband and children. Dinner is served, with the television on, immediately after her husband takes his bath. Usually, the ama is the last one to sit down for dinner, after other members of the family have been served to their content.

If no female children are available, the ama washes the dishes, cleans the house (seldom do male children perform household chores) and folds laundered clothes. Rest is taken after her bath, and she is usually the last one in the family to bathe. Even then, an ama takes time to update the records of her income and household expenses. By the time she is finished, midnight is near and time for bed. When an ama lives with a daughter-in-law, the situation is better for the ama because household chores are shared with her daughter-in-law.

Usually, the women's husbands worked much fewer hours. The men spend most of their time (from waking to unloading catch) at sea and on the farm. The husbands do not participate in household chores.

The above household arrangement reflects the traditional beliefs of Japanese family members where the head of the family reigns in the household. All must obey the head, the females must obey the males. So wives obey their husbands and the younger members of a family obey their elders. Any young woman or man who joins the family as wife or husband becomes an adopted daughter or son and thus submits to the elders. The law of seniority requires that the younger members obey the elder members, even in small matters such as at meal time where the elder boy is served first, then the second son and so on. In this family system, a woman is expected to attend to her husband's every need and a man is seen as superior to women (Hearn, 1904; Hendry, 2003; Morley, 1999; Shinotsuka, 1995, all cited in Kitamura, 2008). A woman could not become the head of a family. This explains why, even in this modern era, women continue to stay at home, do the household chores and nurture their families while the men work outside to provide for the family's financial needs. No matter how talented and capable a woman is, she has to take on her responsibilities as wife, mother and caregiver to elder-in-laws. Even if she has time for a managerial position in an institution, she has a small chance only of being accepted.

### ***Community activities***

The women ama engage actively in community work, mostly related to fishing. This includes: the ama cooperative general assembly; ama meetings; ama and boatmen meetings; meetings with other ama in Iki; stocking of red sea urchin, abalone and scorpion fish; and cleaning of the seashore. They also participate in a special religious ceremony where ama offer food to the gods for prosperity, happiness and good harvest, marking the opening of the diving season for abalone, turban shells and sea urchin. This celebration coincides with the celebration of the religious ceremony called *Mikazuki shinji* during which ama from various places offer food to the gods. This happens every year on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar at Mikazuki beach, situated along the border between Kuzaki and Ijika of Mie Prefecture. Many considered this ceremony so important that it was said, “better to offer food to the gods (that is, participate in the diving ritual) once than to visit Ise shrine seven times” (Bouchy, 1999).

### **Ama’s views of their work.**

In the absence of alternative employment opportunities within the community and given their low education, many women ama view diving as a comfort as it is a source of additional income. Married women who relied solely on the limited income of their husbands were forced to learn to dive. This was the case of a woman ama who migrated to Yahautara after getting married to a fisher and who, at the age of 40 and because of financial need, had to learn to dive from a local ama. Most of them considered diving as economically empowering because it permitted them to buy the things they liked without being answerable to their husbands, who are considered the breadwinners of the family. If they have a leadership position in the group, it also earns them higher regard from fellow women divers. Some see diving as something that unites them with nature. Though diving is hard and dangerous, as some said, they came to like it because it connects them with nature, the sea, the wind, and the stars. Others also view diving as a venue for socialisation with their neighbours, and as a time to share their experiences. Diving is seen as exercise, helping them to stay physically healthy as it allows them to trim the weight they may have gained during the off-season.

For all the ama divers interviewed, doing the household chores and taking care of the husband, children and elder-in-laws were viewed as women’s responsibilities.

### **Problems and aspirations in life.**

Asked about the problems confronting them, the ama named three: health; water pollution; and declining catches. For ama whose livelihood relies greatly on their physical and mental ability, health is something that is not to be taken for granted. Taking vitamins and pain killers have become common practices. Women ama aspire to have good health to enable them to continue diving. Women ama also complain of polluted water which adversely affects their catch. Their use of a *ramin* leaf to clean their goggles instead of a detergent was seen as a

simple way of limiting further water pollution. In addition, the Cooperative has engaged in stock enhancement and mariculture of abalone, sea urchin and kelp to clean polluted seawater and improve the catch.

When asked of their aspirations in life, most of them mention good health to enable them to continue diving, greater catches, higher prices for abalone, sea urchin and turban shells, more productive fishing grounds, and gainful employment for their children.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The women ama continue to play a crucial role in Japanese fisheries and community life, being involved in spheres of reproduction, production and community activities. The stories of the ama affirm the long standing social problems in Japan caused by the low status of women. Renowned for their courage, stamina, diving skill, endurance, and strength, the women ama live a life of danger and hard work and contribute substantially to sustaining the fisheries, family and community, but yet are unrecognised and marginalised.

Gender divisions of labour in the study site underscore the deeply-rooted nature of inequality in the gender roles and relationships in Japan. Gender roles are characterised by a strong sense of patriarchy in the community and society at large, accounting for the rigid delineation of the productive and reproductive spheres. This rigid sexual division of labour validated the results of the survey on time use and leisure activities conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in 2001 which found that among Japanese married couples, husbands spent little time on household duties, child care and nursing care, regardless of whether their wives worked or did not work (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, 2004). This situation forced working wives to shoulder heavy responsibilities both at home and work, leaving them little time to engage in other more economically productive activities outside the home.

In the family, the gender division of labor means that the man is expected to be the primary breadwinner of the family and the woman to be the primary caregiver. This is shown by the activities pursued by the women ama and their time allocations in relation to those of their spouses. But the analysis of women ama's time allocations shows that they are more than primary caregivers. Forced by the declining number of male fishers and the need to augment family income, they have also become breadwinners themselves although to a lesser and limited extent. Economic empowerment in the form of a seasonal higher income from diving is limited to providing a certain liberty in household decision-making (buying things they want for the family without being directly accountable to their husbands) and higher respect from among fellow women divers which, sometimes, gets translated into leadership positions in their own groups.

The ama's access to administrative decision-making position is quite limited. The dominance of men in managerial positions in the organisational structure of the Cooperative as well as among the management staff demonstrates the marginalisation of women and their relegation to non-leadership positions.

Gender inequality is still deeply rooted in the Japanese psyche. While the Cooperative could be commended for finding ways to increase production of abalone and sea urchins to relieve women ama of even more laborious efforts in diving for such resources, the attitude that women should stay home to be wives, mothers and homemakers, that women are noisy, that membership in their (ama) group is enough and that diving is mainly for women, remains pervasive and thus, a barrier to the personal growth of women who desire a greater sense of freedom, confidence and control of their life. With the rigid sexual division of labour in the family, the ama women divers' *amagoya* where they enjoy themselves, even if for just a few hours of freedom and self-expression away from the burden and demands of their families, will continue to play a very important role in their lives.

To improve the status of ama women divers, the present study also argues that the community needs to respect women ama and promote policies that increase their personal wealth, power and political influence. This may mean opening up opportunities for greater participation in the decision-making of the cooperatives, elevating women to positions of leadership in the FCAs, and increasing men's participation in domestic chores.

To break free from the deeply-seated patriarchal mindset which characterises the community, and which gets translated in the local institutions such as family and cooperatives, educational reform must be instituted (Lim, 2009). This reform could be done through public information campaigns, training, and changes in school textbooks. This will be a long process but definitely an empowering one.

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