

BRAVING THE SEA: THE AMASAN (WOMEN DIVERS) OF YAHATAURA FISHING COMMUNITY, IKI ISLAND, NAGASAKI PREFECTURE, JAPAN

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Ama (or Amasan) which literally means “sea person” are men and women divers who use high speed diving technique but without scuba gear or air tanks. Honed by years of experience, the Ama divers are professional divers whose diving prowess depends largely on their lung capacity, diving speed, resistance to cold, intuition for finding their catch and determination to succeed. Ama divers dive for seaweed, shellfish, sea urchin, lobster, sea cucumber, oyster, octopus and abalone which is the most preferred catch being delicious and one of the most prized food. Despite their significant contribution to the fishing industry, they remain invisible and marginalized.

Using participant observation, focus group discussion and key informant interviews, this study provides a picture of the Amasan (women divers) in the fishing village of Yahataura, Iki Island, Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan. These women divers’ access to and control over resources, activities and time allocation, and access to political and administrative decision-making processes were examined in relation to the men 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 vis-à-vis men. Some ways to improve their social standing in the community are set forth in the study.