

Sprouting a New Generation of Female Entrepreneurs



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FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS face a multitude of challenges in getting their businesses started. Launching a company can be especially tough for women in Japan, who often have to take up household responsibilities and raise children as well. Fukuoka Prefecture-based SPROUT Women Entrepreneurs Association, an organization founded by female entrepreneurs, was formed expressly to guide female entrepreneurs through every step needed to bring the seeds of their business ideas and hopes to fruition.

Representative director Aki Makino started SPROUT in 2011 after completing a course taught by business consultant and Fukuoka local Kaori Umeyama. As Makino established her own web consulting company, she and four other classmates—including SPROUT's assistant director, Yoshimi Miyamoto—got together with Umeyama to guide

other female entrepreneurs through the obstacles they themselves were facing.

Women bring their own unique approach to business as entrepreneurs. Makino notes that many who come to SPROUT choose business ideas that are logical extensions of their hobbies or enable better work-life balance. She says women are also more attentive to needs that men may not perceive.

Rather than merely receiving information, SPROUT's members hone their skills through organizing social networking sessions, training sessions and regional activities with other organizations. For example, SPROUT's training sessions include two very practical courses, one of which helps prospective entrepreneurs develop their business plans and other basic knowledge. "We're the only organization in Fukuoka that provides support to female entrepreneurs from the beginning of a company's establishment onward, including fostering ideas

- 1 A SPROUT lecture during the management course
- 2 New entrepreneurs consulting with the experts
- 3 SPROUT's assistant director, Yoshimi Miyamoto (left), and business consultant Kaori Umeyama (right)



about entrepreneurship and making business plans,” Makino points out.

The management course targets entrepreneurs who have already been in business for several years and need to refine their business models or strategies. Makino says that businesses run by women fail at a slightly higher rate compared to those run by men, and not necessarily because of poor ideas: it may be the strenuous effort required to strike a balance between work and household responsibilities, raising children or caring for elderly parents, or the challenges of keeping the business going when the husband has to move office that makes it hard to maintain their forward momentum. One goal she has for SPROUT is to promote continuity after a business is established.

Each and every member of SPROUT’s staff has started her own business, , meaning they can view situations from an entrepreneur’s

perspective. SPROUT also organizes consultations with experts to supply support in six different areas—management, business establishment and creative processes as well as tax, labor and legal issues. SPROUT’s extensive network can assist entrepreneurs applying for financial assistance and serve as resources to meet any other needs they have.

One Fukuoka woman knew what she wanted, which was to create an opportunity for Japanese children to learn English through activities such as dance, singing and martial arts, but “didn’t know where to go from there,” says Makino. SPROUT helped her create a pricing structure and the financing necessary to start the business, design fliers and set up a website. Now the business is doing well, and customer surveys—another aspect on which SPROUT lent her advice—have yielded positive reviews.

As an organization SPROUT may still be a seedling, but Makino said her focus is to continue supporting an ever-greater number of female entrepreneurs. **1**