

Athletes at the start of the 100 meter dash at the January 2023 Ladies First meet (all photos Jan. 2023)

Supporting Female Athletes of Tanzania

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been offering support to host Ladies First—a track and field meet for women in the United Republic of Tanzania.

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IN November 2017, Ladies First, the first track and field meet for women in Tanzania, was jointly held by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Tanzanian National Sports Council for two days in the United Republic of Tanzania in East Africa. The meet was held at the National Stadium in Dar es Salaam, the country's largest city, and 105 athletes from 24 of the country's 31 regions participated in 11 events, including the 100 meter dash, the 5,000 meter race, and javelin.

Together with JICA, former Tanzanian marathon runner Juma Ikangaa worked on hosting this meet. He participated in Olympic games in Los Angeles in 1984 and in Seoul in 1988, and won the Tokyo International Marathon in 1984 and 1986. He currently runs a track and field club in Tanzania, working to train young track and field athletes.

“Actually, the first time Tanzania won

a medal at an international track and field competition was in 1965, in the women's javelin. But the idea that sports are for men is strongly rooted in Tanzania, and the number of women participating in sports did not increase,” says Ikangaa. “Ladies First is held to encourage more women to participate in sports.”

As there are limited opportunities for female athletes to train in any sport in Tanzania, there are few female athletes participating internationally. However, as there are medal-winning female track and field athletes from the neighboring Republic of Kenya and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, it is highly possible that there are talented women in Tanzania, as well. One of the major goals of Ladies First is to focus on female track and field athletes who have not had enough opportunities for practice or participation in competitions and to discover and develop athletes who can participate in international competitions.

The number of participants in Ladies First increases each time the tournament

is held. There were 129 participants in 2018, 138 in 2019, and 210 women from 30 regions participated in the fourth meet in January of this year (2023), the highest number of participants yet. To support the meet, Japanese companies have donated operating funds, t-shirts, and more.

Through Ladies First, connections are developing overseas. Athletes who performed well in the 2017 Ladies First meet were invited to participate in a marathon held in October 2018 in Nagai City, Yamagata Prefecture, the registered host townⁱ for Tanzania for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Tanzanian athletes who participated in both the full marathon and the half marathon came in first at this event. At the Ladies First meet in 2019, participants also included four athletes from South Sudanⁱⁱ, where JICA offers support in hosting national sports events.

“We have also discovered athletes with incredible talent. We can expect our female athletes to earn medals at

international competitions in the near future,” says Ikangaa. “Awareness of the importance of sports for women is spreading in Tanzania, thanks to this meet.” Not stopping with simply offering access to sports with Ladies First, JICA also hosts a variety of side events, recognizing the event as an opportunity to widely promote women’s empowerment. In addition to holding a jogging event, an educational program to prevent teenage pregnancy, and a workshop on women’s empowerment for athletes led by a university professor from Japan were conducted. Booths for health checks and consultations on Sexual and Gender Based Violence were also set up. Around 1,000 students from elementary and junior high schools in Dar es Salaam were also invited to watch the meet.

“Ladies First is an important event for women in Tanzania, including myself,” says Neema Msitha, Secretary General of the National Sports Council, who has been involved in the operations of Ladies First since the first meet. “With side events related to the various challenges which women face, Ladies First is not only about sports, but is also having an impact on society.”

Through TV, newspapers, radio, and other forms of media, as well as social media, Ladies First is now widely known. The Tanzanian government also recognizes its importance and is considering hosting qualifying tournaments in the future for Ladies First in each region of the country to offer opportunities for more women to participate.

“What is most significant about offering sports to women is that it develops confidence among women,” says Msitha. “I believe that sports have the power to change the women of Tanzania.” **17**



Participants in discussion at a workshop on women’s empowerment



Athletes running the 100 meter dash final



Athletes gathering for the closing ceremony



A team from Zanzibar receiving an award for their win in the inter-region match

i See *Highlighting Japan* June 2021, “Host Town Initiative for Tokyo 2020” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202106/202106_01_en.html
 ii See *Highlighting Japan* July 2019, “National Unity through Sports” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/201907/201907_02_en.html