II. CHANGES AND PROBLEMS OF RURAL LIFE AND RURAL WOMEN IN JAPAN: THE KEY ROLE OF RURAL WOMEN LEADERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The prototype for the Japanese rural family emerged before the rapid economic growth in the mid 1950s to the early 1970s. Essentially, a typical rural family was a patriarchal stem type, called “Ie”. Rural communities composed of such families were governed by male senior and middle-aged citizens. Women in those communities were primarily viewed as unpaid laborers, whose main tasks were to have children and take care of the elderly. After the economic growth, “Ie” remained a part of the Japanese rural family system, but it has undergone major changes since then. Rural communities gradually accepted changes such as increase in number of non-farm households in a community. Rural families attempt to adapt to the changing social conditions while respecting each member’s individuality. Despite these changes, the level of gender equality in terms of role sharing in the rural community was still not enough. Women are still excluded from the family and community decision-making mechanisms. This paper aimed to show an outline of the change in rural life, and to point out crucial issues that revolve around rural families and women in Japan. The paper also cited a case study on a rural woman leader to further emphasize the vital role women play in agriculture and in rural community development. The case study highlighted how the Family Management Agreement and the Rural Women Enterprise can empower rural women and promote sustainable development of farm management and regional agriculture at the same time. This paper also discusses other public and social support that promote rural women’s activities based on two Japanese basic laws: Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society; and Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Farming Villages.

Key words: patriarchal stem family, unpaid laborers, gender equality, rural women, public and social support for rural women, family management agreement, rural women enterprise

IMAGE VERSUS REALITY

An example of a typical rural family can be found before the period of rapid economic growth in Japan from the mid ‘50s to the early ‘70s. The rural (or agricultural) family was essentially a patriarchal stem family called “Ie”. Because families included unmarried close relatives, they were usually quite large. Stay-in workers lived in a large farm with the farm owners. Inheritance of the family business and property was based on an established system. The basic rural community in Japan, a village called “Mura”, was conceived and accepted by the Japanese traditional household “Ie” coalitions. The “Omodachi”, representatives of influential “Ie” families who were senior citizens and middle-aged men, took charge of the “Mura”. One main feature of the Japanese rural communities is their homogeneity. This network of geographical and close relations often interfered with the management of individual households. Women were seen solely as unpaid laborers, who have and take care of children.

However, the rural family has changed enormously in the recent years. The family structure in Japan has included unmarried and extended family members. Diverse management styles and lifestyles have emerged from the stem family. As families with farms increase their income with other businesses, family
members are more and more engaged in different jobs. Even those who have agricultural work are subject to greater division of labor. Lifestyle changes have affected life outside of work as well: families that are farming increasingly divide their budgets, meals, and living quarters into smaller family units. Use of living rooms is often divided, with the married couple owning majority of the place. Many family members are also commuting to get to the farm. These changes do not signal the end of the stem family. If anything, they reflect the Japanese rural family’s attempts to adapt to changing social conditions while respecting each family member’s individuality.

On the other hand, growing heterogeneity among families in a Japanese rural community can be noted since the rapid economic growth. Recently, about 90% of the families in a rural community live in non-farm households. Managing the Japanese rural community is changing, but rural women are still excluded from decision-making. Patriarchy remains as the distinguishing characteristic of a rural family.

THE CHANGING LIFESTYLE OF THE RURAL FAMILY

Japan’s period of rapid economic growth was a major factor in altering the landscape of agriculture and rural farming villages. During this period, agriculture and farmers’ lifestyles were “modernized”. There was a significant shift to living the urban life. Washing machines, refrigerators, televisions, interior toilets and baths became the way of life, and the farm kitchen also rapidly improved. As a result, the amount of heavy labor families performed decreased evidently. Houses also changed: from families of multi-generation members living in neighboring rooms separated only by thin walls or sliding doors, to homes ensuring a greater measure of privacy for couples. The move of eldest and younger sons, and women in the family to other industries added supplementary businesses and eventually caused “rurbanization.” Values also changed. Examples are (1) the emergence of individualism (equality under the law and respect for choosing one’s career, living arrangement, and marriage); (2) changing attitudes about nature (from feared to conquerable or developable); and (3) a partial shift to economic rationalism. All of these developments led to the spread of economic orientation.

Consequently, the Japanese rural family underwent a major change. Patriarchal family relations weakened, and the emotional bonds between couples and their children in particular were emphasized. Parent-child agreements provided impetus for the further differentiation of lifestyles for each married couple in a family. Factors that proved this development include the following: (1) the assignment of farm management responsibilities to the family successors and encouragement of participation in farming; (2) the shift away from treating farm heirs as “unpaid workers” and provision of wages and allowances to each family member, and (3) housing improvements.

While the stem family remained the standard, the changing demographics in the 1950s in Japan were caused by a drop in the number of children a couple has, and loss of collateral family properties to other enterprises. Overall (with regional variation), the size of a Japanese rural family became smaller. Live-in employees and other laborers considered as members of the family were gone. The family farming business was no longer the interest of inheritance, and only family assets continued to be passed down generations after generations.

Multi-generation cohabitation, which had been the stereotype for farming families, gave way to an ideal family based on married couples. Farm heirs had less disposable income than their white collar peers, and men had a hard time getting wives because of the heavy labor awaiting women on farms. Some heirs made the effort to carve out their own management systems to overcome this adversity. This was simultaneous to efforts of many farmers to avoid relying on supplementary (non-agricultural) income by moving away from rice-only farming.

Women, however, were still unpaid for their labor, with little chance of self-realization. Traditional views of gender roles and women’s work remained strong. As agricultural productivity rose, the division between productive labor and housework was becoming clear. Because of gender role prejudices, women were increasingly shunted into housework— with their labor noted as “shadow work.” Farming women, thus, have been defined as mere help to their husbands,
who are the “entrepreneurs” of the modern farming industry in Japan.

**INDIVIDUALISM WITHIN THE STEM FAMILY**

Rural families today, particularly those engaged solely in agriculture (but excluding those in depopulated areas and in regions like Kagoshima where the youngest son is traditionally the heir) have evolved from a period of a married couple-led family to individual-led one, but still of stem or large in nature.

In other words, the family structure did not do away much from Japan’s traditional kind of rural family. Despite the growing difference in the generations and lifestyles of family members, what is actually occurring is that the three-generation family setup is barely holding on or that the families themselves are falling apart, hence, not totally shifting to a new household model. Individualization and heterogenization are affecting even farming families, and that today’s farm families tend not to be coherent in this sense. Families are also shrinking. Traditional inheritance systems have almost faltered. Inheritance of family assets has been particularly weakened by rising urban land prices and population decrease in rural villages.

Notable changes in rural families can be summarized as follows: (1) unaltered stem family morphology, (2) increasing emphasis on the emotional bonds between couples and their children, (3) a shift to farm management by individuals, and (4) an increasing difference among lifestyles of family members. The second change has been problematic since Japan’s period of rapid economic growth. It proved to be an important factor in the progression of the third and fourth changes mentioned. Moreover, the third and the fourth changes share the following characteristics: (a) increasing responsibility and participation in farm management by women, (b) decreased treatment of women as unpaid workers and provision of their personal budgets, and (c) increasing individual human networking outside the family structure. It must be added that the third characteristic represents a shift away from traditional forced bonds to relationships based on choice. This paved way for the creation of new human pipelines in the family and community. In this context, the bases for individual expression are being established, at the same time, communities are evolving into new forms. It is worth noting that different lifestyles of the family members are caused by intra and intergeneration lifestyle balance, but because of the general trend of individualism, this balance is not easily attained and maintained.

**THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN**

In Japanese farming villages, the number of women accounts for approximately 55% of the total farming population, making the role of women very important in agricultural production as they handle important tasks such as housekeeping, and responsibilities of taking care of the children and the elderly. These days, the number of women, mainly rural women leaders who play an active role in society of farming villages, has been increasing.

Rural women leaders now in their 50s and 60s played a key role in changing the rural family. These women were born during the post-War period, and were among the first generation to receive democratic education. Many of these women began farming only after marriage, regardless of whether they were born to a farming family or not. Majority of the women began to seriously take on leadership roles in their 30s, after giving birth to their children. Many were born in the cities to families of white collar professions, and had no previous knowledge of or experience with agriculture. Ironically, it was this unawareness that allowed them to view themselves as active individuals at the time agriculture and rural farming villages were in trouble. Their activities have expanded from their own farms and lifestyles to the community and even the urban areas. They have also been involved in farmers’ markets, direct sales, processing agricultural products, passing down traditions and creating new ones, community building, managing local resources, responding to environmental issues, welfare for the elderly, liaising with urbanites and consumers, and more. Women own businesses. A kind of income generation activity in rural Japan is called the “Rural Women Enterprise”. The enterprises are promoted, and get support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, the local government units, and
agricultural cooperatives, among others.

Activities to send women representatives to agriculture committee and city assemblies of cities, towns, and villages have already started in every rural area. Their actions have changed agriculture and rural society gradually but steadily. At present, rural women leaders have overcome a lot of difficulties and become important key persons in developing agriculture and rural life in Japan. However, they still belong to a minority.

After World War II, various supporting efforts, including seminars and rural women organizations, have been delivered for improvement of abilities and social position of rural women. The Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, the local government, and agricultural cooperatives are supportive of such endeavors as well. The Agricultural Improvement Extension Centers located in each municipality nationwide has also played a major role in the promotion.

Rural women leaders value couple-based family structures, as well as those with family members of different generations. They also seek ways of self-realization. Many rural women try to manage the divergent life vectors of family balance, couple-based living patterns, and individualism in order to live empowered, subjective lives. These women emphasize and promote family management agreements along with supporting organizations. Farm management agreements, also promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, and the local governments, seek balance among the lifestyles of the same and different generations and an individual’s lifestyle, and simultaneously promote a shift to new farming family relations, with equal partnership among family members.

IN THE CASE OF A RURAL WOMAN LEADER

Mrs. Kanae Uwano, a rural woman leader in Japan, lives in Takizawa, a village adjacent to Morioka, the capital of Iwate Prefecture, and located about 500km north of Tokyo. She runs a farm whose main products are apples. Takizawa belongs to a farming district blessed with abundant land resources. Farmers in this village are mostly engaged in multiple cropping, combining paddy rice cultivation or dairy farming with growing apples and vegetables, which are the main industries in the area. Recently, the production of flowers is increasing, too.

Kanae’s family has six members, which is of four generations: her husband (65), mother-in-law (86), her eldest son (35) and his wife (34) and their daughter.

Kanae and her husband are the main workers at their farm. While her husband is responsible for crop management and coming up with work plans, Kanae takes charge of customer service, sale of apples and bookkeeping. In April 2004, her eldest son resigned as a teacher and began to join his parents as a farmer. Kanae’s daughter-in-law mainly does the housework and takes care of their daughter, and Kanae’s mother-in-law manages the family’s premises.

The family’s farm is composed of 230 acres (a) of apple orchards and 20 a of vegetable fields, which are used partly as a venue for visitors, and partly as a farm for growing vegetables for the family’s own consumption. A total of 19 apple varieties are planted, the most important of which is Fuji, which occupies 40 percent of the orchards’ total area, followed by Orin, Yoko, Hokuto, Kio and Jona Gold. When apples became the farm’s main product, the family began to call their apple orchards “Uwano Apple Orchards.” Besides apple production, the family manages apple orchards for stock owners and carries out other tourism activities, such as orchard ownership plans and firsthand learning experience programs in farming. The orchards managed by Kanae’s family have about 2,000 visitors per year. The family owns a direct sale store of farm produce, and its sales, combined with that of home delivery service account for about 50 percent of the total sales. There are about 200 stock owners of the orchards, and 20 percent of the sales come from these owners. Kanae’s other family businesses include sale at the district’s joint store (10% of the total sales), the apple orchard for the tourists (10%), participation in community events (5%) and shipment to the local JA agricultural cooperative (5%).

Kanae, now 60, was born in 1946, just after the World War II ended. She is the seventh child of eleven brothers and sisters in a family of farmers in Kuzumaki, a mountainous area 60km northeast of Takizawa. After graduating from junior high school, she worked
as an employee at the local agricultural cooperative for five years. At 20, she got married and moved to Takizawa to join her husband and her in-laws as a farmer. During those days, the family’s farm consisted of 180 a of paddy fields and 100 a of apple orchards. Two years after the marriage, Kanae and her husband started pig farming, and they gradually increased the number of pigs in their farm. This happened almost at the same time as the road in front of their house was being reconstructed to prepare for the national athletic team meeting to be held in the prefecture. Seeing this event as an opportunity, Kanae took a major step in promoting the direct sale of their apples to possible consumers. The purpose was to increase the value of their apples as much as possible. At present, direct sale of apples is common, but at that time, it was regarded as a folly by most farmers in the district. In 1980, Kanae established her own permanent apple store. As a result, her apple production increased gradually. During that period, she had four children, and while she was engaged in housework and childcare, she continued to work in pig farming and cultivation of apples and other crops with her husband.

When her son graduated in college, he said to his parents: “I will join you two as a farmer ten years from now. So please continue to improve and expand the apple orchards.” These words inspired her. Her son chose to work as a high school teacher first. Kanae and her husband decided to cultivate apples, a crop that does not require too much labor, and discontinued pig farming and paddy rice cultivation. At the same time, they started tourism activities including farm ownership plans, in an effort to further enhance the value of their apples. Kanae took the initiative in establishing an easy-to-use apple warehouse, a warehouse of farm implements, a direct sale store, a room for firsthand experience learning, a resting place and a multi-purpose hall. According to Kanae, one of the reasons for introducing the farm ownership plans was the fact that a friend, whom she knew while both were taking care of their children, told her that their apple orchards were wonderful and that she envied her. Kanae said, “Whenever I have applicants for orchard owners, I always ask them to come to the orchards and to walk through them. While showing them around the orchards, I talk with them about everything. I encourage them to imagine that they are the owners of the orchards. If they become the owners, I hope they understand the feelings of apples growing here and the process of their ripening. I like those who sympathize with my wishes, and hope for them to become the owners. This may be a little selfish, but I think I can get along well with them in the apple orchards if what I can offer them and their own wishes complement. We will try to treat the owners of the apple orchards like our own family, calling them ‘the apple family members’.” In fact, the owners can enter and visit their orchards any time of the year, and can take a rest at the owners’ resting place, “Gororian,” helping themselves with a cup of tea or coffee. Kanae is also committed to providing barrier-free facilities, and constructed a toilet and paths in the orchards for users with disabilities.

In doing these activities, Kanae signed a “Family Management Agreement” with her husband. This agreement dwells on matters about farm work and family life regarding role sharing, decision making, remuneration and holidays, working hours and other aspects of daily life. “Though I have not dared to tell this even to my husband, I have strongly felt women married to farmers are disadvantaged and problematic. I cooperated with my husband, who told me his dream was to work as a full-time farmer, and I worked hard as a wife and a daughter-in-law to help our family out of difficulty, but my life as an individual and my efforts were never officially recognized. So, when I decided to try new agricultural activities, I thought I should sign a family management agreement with my husband so that I could work harder and become an example as a community leader,” said Kanae. After the agreement was made, she found out the total amount of her salary for the first time. Financial loans and their repayment plans were also made clear because of bookkeeping which started under the agreement, and the share of farm and other work was defined.

After Kanae introduced her tourism plans, other farmers in the area began to work on a variety of activities for the same purpose as well. About three years ago, the “Flower Festival” started in Uwano Apple Orchards. In this event, a group called “Network of All
Good Products from Yanagisawa hamlet,” which was created by Kanae and her friends, established a section for selling farm products, and has continued interactions with many people. In addition, based on this network, the “Group of the Foot of Mt. Iwate” was also formed. To offer young people opportunities to study various subjects, Kanae is willingly lending them part of her farm, meeting places and tools. Her dream is endless; she cultivates and harvests buckwheat, the traditional food in the area, and studies new ways of cooking this crop. She also plans to establish a rural restaurant and a confectionary factory, and to expand their direct sale store. According to Kanae, “The Group is mainly composed of relatively young people, and I hope its members will become the future leaders of the community.”

As a representative of rural women groups and as a leader farmer approved by the Governor of Iwate Prefecture, Kanae is also contributing a lot to the promotion of gender equality and to the revitalization of rural agriculture.

PROBLEMS IN RURAL LIFE AND WOMEN, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Whether new forms of social cohesion based on respect for each family member and the independence of local communities is possible or not, it will greatly affect the future lifestyles of Japan’s farming communities. If this proves impossible, the crises facing agriculture and rural farming villages will only deepen. In either case, the role rural farming women will play is critically important, just like how Mrs. Kanae Uwano has proven how important her role is.

Since 1990, women’s role in agriculture has finally begun to be recognized. In order for the farm management to improve and develop, the positions and roles of both heirs and women must be clarified, efforts must be made to improve productivity, and family members must respect each other’s individuality and learn to see each other as partners. The stem family is capable of flexibly responding to these new management and lifestyle changes to support contemporary society’s diverse family structures and lifestyles. The further development of agriculture and farming lifestyles will depend on the creation of new relationships within the rural family.

One of the salient characteristics of rural farming society is the low mobility of families and individuals: people tend to continue living in one place. This is particularly relevant in examining the problems of family asset inheritance and sustaining the needs of family members living together, which accompany the likely future of the stem family as the dominant paradigm for the rural family. Because of this tendency, the phenomenon of “multigenerational permanent residence” is often viewed as natural. However, given today’s socioeconomic situation, the declining birthrate in Japan, and the penetration of individualistic values, the stem family (and consequently problems mentioned above) are gradually falling out of step with the contemporary society. When this happens, women will likely be forced to shoulder an unfairly heavy burden. This will adversely affect women’s independence. It is therefore necessary to create diverse family structures using the stem family. Systems of family inheritance and supporting the needs of all the members of a large family should be introduced to the community.

In the end, the rural family will likely remain to be the center of the stem family structure. As agriculture itself has become a matter of choice, so has the stem family become indispensable. Moreover, systems of farmland inheritance must be developed, simultaneously respecting individual rights and ensuring secure and stable transitions. The “modernization of family relationships” is proposed in agricultural administration without discussing appropriate management transfer/inheritance. What must be problematic now is that despite advocating the establishment of modern family management practices, nothing has been done to change the pre-modern patriarchal stem family practices of management transfer and inheritance. This exceptionally difficult issue is, in fact, already being addressed in communities around Japan. Systematic support is needed to solve the bevy of problems it comes with.

It is very useful to promote “Family Management Agreement” and “Rural Women Enterprise” in the light of not only empowering rural women but also developing farm management and regional agriculture. As a premise, in rural families and farm village communities, it goes without saying that it is
necessary to push forward gender equality in all aspects.

The “Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society” was publicized and enforced in June 1999 in Japan, so as to “maintain equal opportunities for both men and women to participate in various activities in all social fields according to the intentions of each individual as equal constituent members of the society”. In addition, the “Basic Law on Food, Agriculture, and Farming Village” was established in 1999, stipulating that “maintenance of an environment shall be promoted so as to provide fair evaluation on the role, maintain opportunities for women to take part in the management of farming, as well as to maintain opportunities for rural women to take part in the management of farming according to their own intentions, and to take part in related activities.” Public and social supports for rural women should be provided in promoting rural women’s activities including promotion of “Family Management Agreement” and “Rural Women Enterprise” based on the two Basic Laws.