

The Characteristics and the Challenges of Rural Women's Entrepreneurial Activities in Japan

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Abstract

Rural women's entrepreneurial activities (RWEAs here in after) in Japan have been regarded as the object of policy support, and both the number and the variety of activities are increasing. RWEAs in Japan can be characterized by the inclusive participation of non-pioneer, non-farmer women (including non-farm households). RWEAs are economic activities, but they prioritize improvement of quality of life and community over profit. With such a characteristic, RWEAs enabled various social effects such as sustaining food security, maintaining rural culture, environmental preservation, mental empowerment of women and aged people in addition to economic achievements such as stabilizing the farm-household economy, empowering women's economic status, activating the local economy, and promoting local agriculture. Recently, "Chisan-chisho" (local production for local consumption), and "shokuno-kyoiku" (food and agriculture education) have also been attracting attention.

Rural women's entrepreneurial activities that have developed putting importance on improvement of quality of life are mainly operated by aged people on a small scale, and their sustainability is a matter of question.

On the other hand, the communal and public role of rural women's entrepreneurial activities should be re-evaluated, and their meaning should be reconsidered in the context of agricultural and rural policy.

1. Introduction

Rural women's entrepreneurial activities (RWEAs here in after) in Japan have been regarded as the object of policy support, and both the number and the variety of these activities are increasing.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF here in after), RWEAs are defined as activities by rural women related to agriculture, forestry, or fisheries. They use local products, be managed mainly by rural women, and generate income for women. Major areas for RWEAs include farmers' markets, processing of agricultural products, restaurants using local products, and rural-urban interchange.

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community over profit. With these characteristic, RWEAs enabled various social effects such as sustaining food security, maintaining rural culture, environmental preservation, mental empowerment of women and aged people in addition to economic achievements such as stabilizing the farm-household economy, empowering women's economic status, activating local economy, and promotion of local agriculture. Recently, "Chisan-chisho"(local production for local consumption), and "shokuno-kyoiku"(food and agriculture education) is also attracting the attention.

In this paper, the characteristics of RWEAs in Japan will be explained and then, the challenges faced by RWEAs will be discussed.

2. Characteristics of rural women's entrepreneurial activities

(1) History of rural women's entrepreneurial activities

RWEAs in Japan can be characterized its inclusive participation (including non-farm households) by women not only pioneer women farmers (Fig 1).

This is one of the reasons why RWEAs has contributed to activating local economies and communities. Since the 1990's, agricultural policy in Japan has limited its attention to group 1 in Figure 1, but all rural women who participate in RWEA activities have been given support.

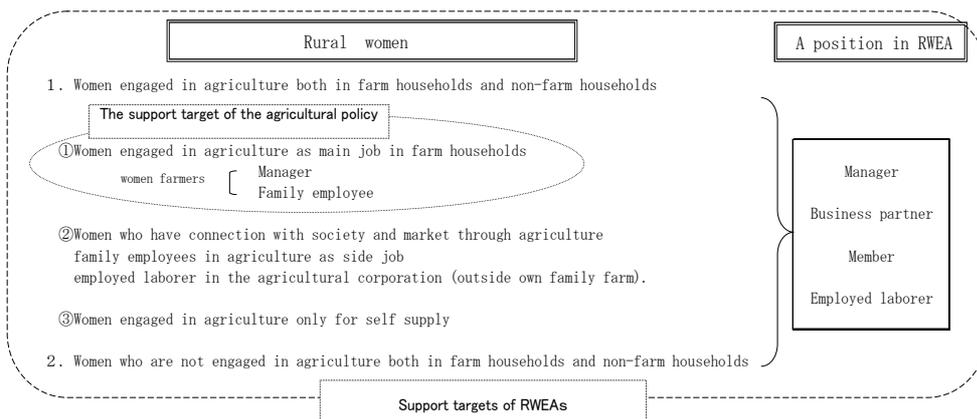


Figure 1 The key map of the woman who participates in RWEA

Such inclusive participation by rural women is rooted in the history of the emergence of RWEAs. RWEAs have decades of history starting from small, group activities such as agricultural production and processing by Agricultural Cooperatives Women's Clubs or Life-Improvement Practice Groups for providing healthy and safe food for their families (Table 1)

Table 1 Historical background of RWEA in Japan

	Activities of Rural women in Japan	Rural women' s policy in Japan	Trends of the agriculture and rural community in Japan
1950	Rural Life Improvement Activities	Starting of Rural Life Improvement Extension Program	
1960	*By the experience of Rural Life Improvement Activities, such as participation in the cooking course and vegetable gardening activities,participating women mastered agricultural produce processing skillas keepable foods-making	Organizing of Life improvement Practice Group	Basic Agricultural Law enactment
1970	self-sufficiency movement open-air market/morning market	"Rural Women' s Houses" establishment	Starting of Acreage Allotment Program in Rice Production
1980	Making local special identity products	Starting of Relief program for the rural women	One Village One Product Movement,Regional development Movement
1990	Development of RWEA	Official announcement Goals for Rural Women in the 21st Century and a Mid-to Long-term Vision for Achieving Goals Starting of Projects to encourage rural women entrepreneurs formulate a Guidelines to promote gender equality in rural area	Roadside Station establishment Official announcement of the forthcoming Basic Law Concerning Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas Rural Leisure Law (The law on the promotion of staying type leisure activities in the rural area) Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas enactment
2000			

The origin of RWEAs can be traced to the self-sufficiency movement in the 1970's. This movement aimed at family health management and increasing production to compensate for the loss of farm-household income. Gradually, various agricultural products and processed foods came to be sold at casual events and open-air markets. In the 1980's, the regional-development movement became active, and at the same time, positive promotion of the "One-Village-One-Product" Movement began. In these activities, women were important actors for the creation and production of local special identity products. In the 1990's, the increase of farmers' markets, the construction of "Michi no Eki" (Roadside Stations), and the promotion of Green-tourism expanded the markets, and women's activities expanded from only production to also include marketing.

With regards to gender policy, various plans for encouraging rural women were stipulated in a National Action Plan after the First World Conference on Women held in 1975. Through construction of "Nouson Fujin no Ie" (Rural Women's Houses) since the late 1970's, and support programs for rural women since the 1980's, women's opportunities to acquire skills and to process by themselves expanded, and various rural special-identity products were invented.

In the 1990's, agricultural policy changed corresponding to changes of socio-economic conditions. MAFF itself reorganized, and in 1991, the Home Life Improvement Division of the Agricultural Production Bureau was re-organized into

the Women and Life Division. With this reorganization, support for rural women became systematized for the first time. "The forthcoming Basic Law Concerning Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas" (The forthcoming Basic Law here in after) was announced in 1992, and rural women were considered to be an important support for agricultural production and management, and it was declared necessary to support women in exercising their abilities. Based on "The forthcoming Basic Law ", "Goals for Rural Women in the 21st Century and a Mid-to-Long-term Vision for Achieving Goals" ("Vision" herein after) was planned. Policy support for RWEAs was first stipulated in this vision.

(2) RWEAs as realizing "alternative working style"

The "Vision" presented a shift from masculine society placing too much emphasis on profit to a gender-equal society paying respect to life. RWEAs were expected to take the lead in a shift towards a society paying respect to life through realizing "alternative working styles". "Alternative working styles (New working styles)" refers to working styles that are economic activities, but do not prioritize profit but put importance on improvement of quality of life.

Rural women live in rural areas, making use of and conserving rural resources that are unique to the locality. Activities based on such rural life practice "alternative working style". Rural resources include various tangible and intangible resources. Conservation of traditional foods, rural women's activities to conserve them, and rural women's entrepreneurial activities themselves are intangible rural resources.

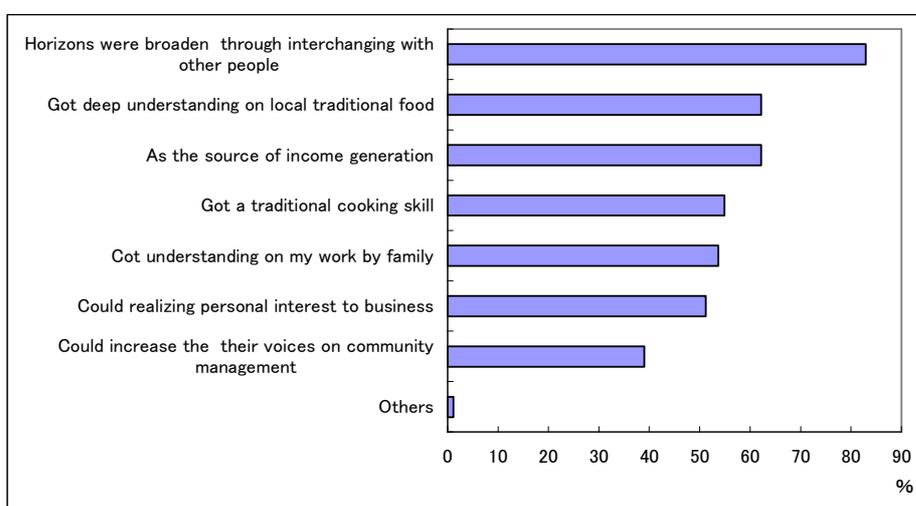
(3) Influence of RWEAs on women and community

Table 2 shows the characteristics of RWEA from three aspects, "economy", "rural life/culture" and "community". Based on this table, the influence of RWEAs on participating women and communities will be examined from the results of a questionnaire survey of the representatives of RWEAs conducted in 2006.

Table 2 Characteristics of RWEA

	Women's empowerment	The activation of rural society
Economy	Woman's economic independence/ The stability of the farm management	The promotion of the local agriculture/ The activation of the local economy
Rural life/ Culture	Women's self-actualization/ The reevaluation of farmer's, rural life	The reevaluation of rural life, rural culture
Community	Women's socialization/ Women's inclusive participation in the local agriculture, community	The activation of the community/ Encouragement of the community power

Figure 2 shows the evaluated influences of RWEAs on participating women. About 80% of respondents answered that they could broaden their horizons through exchange with other people within and outside the community through activities. This result shows that RWEAs could provide chances to be socialized for participating women. About 60% of participating women evaluated that they "got deep understanding of local traditional food" and "got a traditional cooking skill" through activities. About 60% of respondents evaluated RWEAs "as a source of income generation" and it can be understood that RWEAs contributed to economic independence for women. As shown above, RWEAs have a positive influence on empowerment of women. In contrast, only 39% of women answered that they "could increase their voice in community management". Participation in management of local agriculture and community through RWEAs is not sufficient.

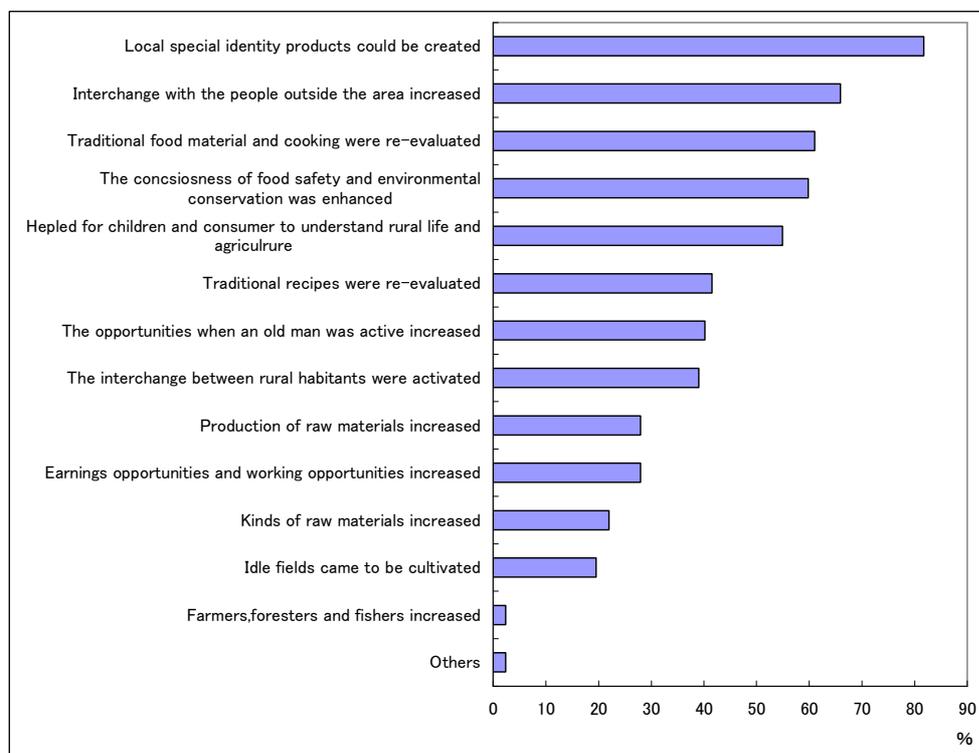


Source: Rural Development Planning Commission "Follow-up research on Food-Amenity Competition prizewinner"

Figure 2 Influence of RWEA on women(MA)

Figure 3 shows the influences of RWEA on community. About 80% of respondents agreed that "local special identity products could be created", and it can be said that RWEAs encouraged participants to re-evaluate rural life and culture and activated the local agriculture, economy, and community. They also agreed with such statements as "interchange with the people outside the area increased" (66%), "traditional food material and cooking were re-evaluated" (61%), "the consciosness of food safety and environmental conservation was enhanced" (60%) "helped children and consumers to understand rural life and agriculture", and "traditional recipes were re-evaluated".

Through interchange between outside consumers and through “shokuno-kyoiku” (education on agriculture and food) with children, traditional food and recipes were re-evaluated, and the consciousness on food safety and environmental conservation was enhanced. As shown above, RWEAs had positive influences both on re-evaluation of rural life and culture, and activating communities. RWEAs have contributed to activating rural society in this way.



Source: Rural Development Planning Commission “Follow-up research on Food-Amenity Competition prizewinner” n:82

Figure 3 Influence of RWEA on community (MA)

3. Present status of RWEAs and policy support

(1) Present status of RWEAs

The number of RWEAs is increasing year by year, reaching 9,444 in 2006. The main activities are food processing, but they are diversifying into other areas. RWEAs are managed mainly in two ways. One is private management with a single owner, and the other is jointly managed. Only 4% are incorporated. About 60% of RWEAs earned less than 3,000,000 yen (about US\$30,000), more than half the participating members were over 60 years old, and half the RWEAs jointly managed had less than 10 members. Small size and aging (particularly with jointly managed types) are critical

issues regarding sustainability of these activities.

As mentioned above, jointly managed RWEAs, occupying about 60% of all RWEAs, have originated mainly from Life-Improvement Practice Groups, and they put emphasis on social contribution and self realization. Therefore, it often happens that they lack in managerial concepts and knowledge. It is critical to reinforce management.

(2) Present status of policy support

The contribution of rural women's activities are highly evaluated in the "Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas" executed in 2005. Currently, MAFF takes measures to encourage RWEAs as follows: 1) training and providing information for processing skills and management, 2) Equipment for facilities for processing and sale, and 3) skill instruction.

As mentioned in 2-(1), development of RWEAs is largely due to policy support. In particular, support by rural life-extension workers has been critical, but the number of rural life-extension workers is decreasing, and at present there are only 1000 staff members in the whole country.

In addition, the main source of budget for supporting RWEAs has shifted from the national government to local governments (prefectures), and specific support has became dependent on local government. With dwindling personnel and budgetary support, many local governments cannot afford to support RWEAs adequately.

4. Challenges for RWEAs

RWEAs have inclusive participation by rural women, and contribute to empowerment of rural women and activation of local communities supported by national and local governments. But now, with the weakening of the support system, RWEAs have several problems. Regarding management, small size of the businesses, age of members, and managerial weakness are observed. Women's participation in local agriculture and community is not enough.

We conclude this report by proposing possible measures to manage problems faced by RWEAs.

1) Problems with management

Small size of the businesses, age of members, managerial weakness.

Participating women themselves should be clear in mind and share the objectives of their activities, and the management system should be consistent with these objectives.

Except for groups that are ending their activities with no new members or that limit

their activities to a hobby level, it would better for RWEAs to become incorporated. Present voluntary groups cannot handle risk management for securing the safety and quality of food, and the responsibility for this tends to be too much for a representative to take.

If the groups prioritize economic profit, they should re-organized into corporate organizations. If they prioritize social contribution, they can become non-profit organizations.

2) Problems with women's social participation

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Insufficient participation by women in local agriculture and community

It should be remembered that in RWEAs, not only pioneer women farmers, but many rural women, including non-farm households, participate.

In particular, with jointly managed activities, representatives may be appointed to managerial posts in the community, but it is rare that members are recruited. But as mentioned above, participation by women itself is participation in community activities. Thus, supporting RWEA policy also leads to support for rural women's social participation.

What is important is to bottom up the rural women's social participation, and the characteristics of RWEA as economic activity leading to social contribution should be understood and shared by the local people. Further interchange and cooperation with various viewpoints between producers and consumers, local people and outside people needs to be promoted, to help local agriculture and community understand the importance of RWEAs.

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