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Japanese Women in Agriculture - Overview

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Report Highlights:

Women play a very important role in the global agricultural workforce, and Japan is no exception. In Japan, while women farmers have always outnumbered male farmers, their presence in leadership positions in the farm sector has been very limited. Traditionally only considered as wives of farmers, the perception and role of women in agriculture in Japan has been gradually changing. This is the first in a series of reports on women in agriculture in Japan. In subsequent reports, Post will describe the initiatives and efforts made by the national and local governments, the farm and business sectors, and by individual women farmers for the cause of women's empowerment in agriculture.

General Information:

Overview of Japan's Women Farmers

In Japan, where small family farms dominate the landscape, women have traditionally been major participants in production agriculture. Though the number of women farmers has shown a declining trend in recent years, the actual number of women engaged in farming has always been greater than that of men.¹ In 2014, the number of female farmers in Japan was 1.14 million, while male farmers accounted for 1.12 million (Table 1). Notwithstanding this virtual parity in numbers, leadership positions in the farm sector have predominantly been occupied by men.

	Unit: Thousand persons					
	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
Total number of farmers	4,819	4,140	3,891	3,353	2,606	2,266
- Women (total number)	2,841	2,372	2,171	1,788	1,300	1,141
- Women (percentage of total)	59%	57%	56%	53%	50%	50%

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

Farmland has traditionally been passed down from father to eldest son, and the role of women in agriculture has generally been that of wife to the (man) farmer. Given that background, it has been difficult to accurately measure the female contribution to the farming activity per se, and their involvement in the agricultural decision-making processes, both on-farm and in the rural communities, has remained low. In farming communities, to assume leadership usually means that one must be a member of the local Agricultural Committeeⁱⁱ or a board member of the agricultural cooperatives (JA). The overall number and proportional representation of women as members of such committees has been very low historically (Table 2). Since the Basic Act for Gender-Equal Society came into force in 1999, the National Chamber of Agriculture (NCA), the central body of agricultural committees, and JA began encouraging greater participation in leadership positions by women; as a result, the number of women participants has been gradually increasing. Notwithstanding these efforts, women accounted for only 7.2 percent of the membership of the agricultural committees in 2014 and a mere 5.3 percent of board members of the agricultural cooperatives in 2012 (latest data available).

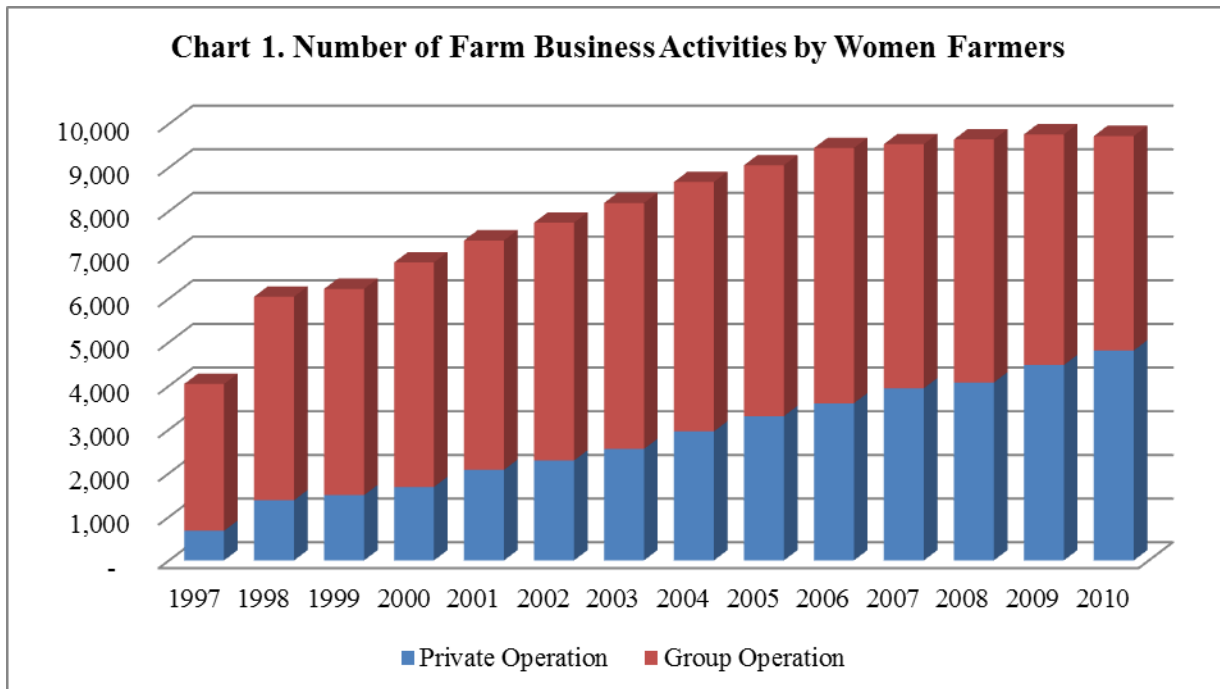
In 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has made empowerment of women in the workplace a key element of his economic reform policies, set a numerical target to raise the proportion of women in leadership positions to 30 percent by 2020. In our second report in this series, we will report on the efforts by NCA and JA to accomplish this goal.

Table 2. Women Farmers' Participation in the Decision-making Process					
					Unit: person
Agricultural Committees	2000	2005	2008	2011	2014
Agricultural Committees Members - Total	59,254	45,379	37,456	36,034	35,653
- Women (total number)	1,081	1,869	1,741	2,070	2,572
- Women (percentage of total)	1.8%	4.1%	4.6%	5.7%	7.2%
Japan Agricultural Cooperatives (JA)					
JA Board Members – Total	32,003	22,799	20,074	18,852	18,910
- Women (total number)	187	438	605	833	998
- Women (percentage of total)	0.6%	1.9%	3.0%	4.4%	5.3%
Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries					

Women's Empowerment Movements in the Agricultural Sector

Japanese women achieved suffrage in 1945, 20 years after the Universal Manhood Suffrage Act came into effect in 1925, but no major impact on the women's empowerment movement in rural communities was observed until the mid-1990s. In 1995, MAFF issued a notice on the "Agreement among Family Members on the Family Farm," which was intended to encourage the heads of farm families, who were usually male farmers, to make a reasonable assessment of the value of labor provided by their family members - wives, sons and daughters - to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each member in the farm operation, and to establish labor rules. In 1996, 5,335 farms reported that they had concluded agreements among family members who work on the farm. By 2014, that number had increased tenfold, to 54,190 farms.

In June 1999, the Basic Act for Gender-Equal Society (*Danjo Kyodo Sankaku Shakai Kihon Ho*) came into force. In July 1999, the Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas (*Shokuryo Nogyo Noson Kihon Ho*) included provisions that stipulated "Promotion of Women's Involvement in Agriculture." Based on those laws, the Japanese Government undertook several measures to implement the promotion of gender equality in agriculture and in rural communities. Those measures included encouraging women to actively participate in the management of agriculture and supported their starting innovative agri-businesses, such as the processing and marketing of locally-grown produce. As a result of those measures - and also the fact that mechanization has lightened the physical burden of farm work and that computerization and the Internet are now ubiquitous in rural areas - women's involvement in farming has become more prominent with more women starting new businesses using local agricultural products. According to a 1997 survey by MAFF, the number of farm business activities carried out by women farmers (Private and Group Operations) was 4,040; by 2010, that number had more than doubled to 9,719 (Chart 1). In our third report in this series we will highlight some of the entrepreneurial young women farmers who have demonstrated the creativity and energy to make farming a more profitable business.



Note: The year is Japanese Fiscal Year (April - March)
 Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

The trend observed in Chart 1 received a boost from programs associated with the concept of the Sixth Industryⁱⁱⁱ that MAFF began promoting in 2009. One of the specific measures of that program encouraged farmers to expand their farm operations to include processing and marketing in order to add more value to their farm products at the farm-gate level.

The second wave of women’s empowerment came when Shinzo Abe assumed the post of Prime Minister in 2012 and revealed his growth strategy, in which female empowerment was one of its pillars. The Prime Minister’s stated goal was to create a society in which “every woman shines.” Given this focus on women’s empowerment to help revitalize the Japanese economy, MAFF started a new project called the “Women Farmers Project” in 2013. While NCA and JA focus on encouraging women to take leadership roles in the farm sector, the new MAFF project targets young women farmers specifically to increase the overall number of women farmers, enhance their presence in their communities, and help women farmers build their business and management skills by collaborating with companies in various industries. As of December 2014, the project had secured the participation of 222 women farmers and 19 major companies, with activities ranging from collaboration with cooking schools to promote their farm products in those schools’ workshops to tie ups with major retailers to develop new food products. One example of such a tie-up is the “pots of strawberries” for Mother’s Day gifts recently being marketed at retail outlets. A young woman farmer in Shizuoka Prefecture suggested the idea of selling such pots of strawberries, as the Japanese character for strawberry “莓” consists of two parts, meaning “plant(艹)” and “mother(母)”, and in collaboration with a fashion design company that participates in the Women Farmers Project, a decorative cover was developed for each pot of strawberries (<http://www.maff.go.jp/j/keiei/nougyoujoshi/pdf/ichigo.pdf>). According to the retailer who sold the products at its outlet in downtown Tokyo, the project was very successful, and the products were well received by customers. For a complete review (Japanese only) of “Women Farmers Project” outcomes, see the report on the project’s website at (<http://nougyoujoshi.jp/>).

This is the first in a series of reports on women in agriculture in Japan. In subsequent reports, Post will further describe initiatives and efforts for women's empowerment in agriculture made by the national and local governments, the farm and business sectors, and women farmers themselves.

- I. Japanese Women in Agriculture: Overview
- II. Veteran Women Farmers Work to Improve Political and Leadership Skills – Efforts Observed in Major Farm Organizations
 - Women Members Network of Agricultural Committees
 - Women Leaders in JA
- III. Entrepreneurial Young Women Farmers Strive to Make Farming Profitable
 - Yamagata Girls Farm (Yamagata Prefecture)
 - Okayama Nosan (Okayama Prefecture)
 - Gerbera Garden (Miyagi Prefecture)
- IV. Businesses and Women Farmers
 - MAFF's Young Women Farmers Project and Collaboration with Businesses

ⁱ In Japan, MAFF's definition of a "farmer" is a member of a farm household who is 15 years old or older and who engages in "subsistence farming" (i.e., family-operated farming). By contrast, in the United States, a farmer is defined as any person who does the work or makes day-to-day decisions about the operation of a farm (i.e., any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the year).

ⁱⁱ The Agricultural Committees have authority over farmland ownership and management, e.g., transferring farmland to other owners; members are elected by other farmers or are recommended by the local agricultural cooperative.

ⁱⁱⁱ The "Sixth Industry" is a MAFF concept that multiplies primary, secondary and tertiary industries to get a "sixth industry" – farming (1) times processing (2) times marketing (3) = 6. Additionally, from a MAFF 2009 Annual Report, "To regenerate rural areas, it is important to promote initiatives to develop agriculture into a "sixth industry" that can help revitalize rural areas, and thereby improve income levels and increase employment opportunities. Specific measures to this end include encouraging farmers' efforts for better processing and marketing practices, and fostering the integration of agriculture and secondary and tertiary industries."