

The Role of Women in Rural Development and the Village Social Structure in Postwar Japan:

A Case Study of the HOME LIVING IMPROVEMENT EXTENSION SERVICE Program¹

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Introduction

In recent years, the importance of a woman's role and participation in rural development has been increasingly recognized. Especially in developing countries where women play a vital role both in the expansion of agricultural production and in improvement of the quality of life. In addition to agricultural labor, women assume domestic responsibilities, taking care of children, fetching and carrying water, collecting fuel wood, cooking, washing clothes and so forth. It has been emphasized among those who are concerned with rural development that lessening their work load through improving the quality of life is essential for the socioeconomic development of rural societies.

In this recent trend of development cooperation, the analysis of Japanese women's experiences in postwar rural development has been of interest within international development circles, as a model of the role women played in the rural modernization process in Asian cultural contexts³. Against this

background our research group examines through literature survey and field work how Japanese women's experiences are related to rural community development in the light of the HOME LIVING IMPROVEMENT EXTENSION SERVICE Program (referred to as HLIESP hereafter), which started immediately after the Second World War and has so far continued for half a century.

The following are the main objectives of our research:

First through demonstrating a well-balanced harmony and complementariness of top-down and bottom-up elements of the HLIESP, as well as describing Japanese women's experiences in coping with and finally overcoming rural poverty in 1940's and 1950's in a village in the central part of Japan, which was more or less similar to the existing conditions in the rural areas of most developing countries, we hope to be of some help to both administrators and socially disadvantaged rural women in Third World countries.

Secondly our research tries to show some

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insights concerning the fundamental question of what “sustainable development” means in a broader context of rapid social change, considering the social sustainability of development projects, the empowerment and development of women through the generations, the sustainability of the rural village community under a wave of urbanization, the accompanying changes of the whole industrial structure, and environmental sustainability etc.

Thirdly, in the process of analyzing the social impacts of women’s life improvement activities, the concept of ‘life’ which has been ambiguously recognized in contrast to ‘production’ is re-examined. It is usually believed that increases in ‘production’ automatically lead to improvement of ‘life’. On the contrary to the above-mentioned one-sided view of the relationship between ‘production’ and ‘life’, our research explores the analysis of the structure of life as a whole that is generated and maintained through continuous interactions of ‘production’ and the other factors of ‘life’ i.e. consumption, reproduction, family etc.

Lastly our research tries to examine the process of Japanese rural modernization from a gender perspective. It explores and attempts to illustrate the historical evolution of the gender division of labor and gender relations in rural societies through the analysis of problems identified by women in each period of rural modernization, as well as the shift of policy approaches adopted in the HLIESP.

This paper consists of three parts: the first part outlines the HLIESP, the second part reports on a case study of women’s activities for home living improvement, carried out in

the first stage of implementation (in late 1940’s and early 1950’s) in a rural village in the central part of Japan, and the third part concerns the historical evolution of the program in a broader context in relation to the social change occurring in Japanese rural areas since the beginning of 1960’s.

1 Outline of the HOME LIVING IMPROVEMENT EXTENSION SERVICE Program

After the Second World War, the Occupation Forces General Headquarters (referred as GHQ hereafter) promoted democratization of rural areas, drastically carrying out the Agrarian Reform. Eighty percent of the whole tenant lands, i.e. 1,930,000 hectares of farmlands, were released to actual cultivators⁴. Agricultural Cooperatives were newly organized. Under the instructions of GHQ⁵, Agricultural Improvement Promotion Law was enacted in 1948 and the program started to assist the new landowning farmers in improving their lives and rationalizing agricultural management.

In contrast to the prewar agricultural technology guidance, the HLIESP was based on the following new concepts and approaches:

- 1) Increase in production and improvement in life were put on an equal footing. This was a departure from the conventional policy which emphasized production and simply assumed an accompanying increase in living standards. On the contrary, the planners of the postwar program believed that the improvement of life would bring about increased production.

- 2) Participatory development was based on local initiative. Instead of a one-sided policy imposed by the government, farmers were encouraged to participate in identifying their problems, groping for a solution, raising funds, and making decisions, while being assisted with services and technology provided by the government.
- 3) Proposals were made appropriate to local cultural contexts through the intensive commitment of mainly female extension workers. These women were trained to become catalysts for change at the local level. They provided feedback and information to policy makers.
- 4) Women and young people who were in a weak position, under the pressure of the more powerful male elders, were advised to organize themselves in order to express their opinions freely.
- 5) The postwar program considered both practical and strategic needs. In other words, the improvement of physical living conditions was regarded as the first step toward the more essential goal of democratization of rural areas. The final goal was to raise the social status of women by reorganizing rural life and changing traditional ideas and ethos that had supported rural communities until that time, which meant the eradication of the cultural survivals of Japanese feudal society.⁶

2 A Case study of women's activities for the improvement of the quality of rural life in late 1940's and early 1950's

The field survey was carried out in 1993

and 1994 in a mountain village called NANASATO-ISSHIKI in Aichi Prefecture, which is bounded on the southeast by Shizuoka Prefecture. It lies in the hilly region 380 to 450 meters above sea level. The area of the village is about 20.5 square kilometers. It consists of seven scattered hamlets built on the steep slopes of the mountains. It takes two hours from Nagoya to this village by train, but there was no public transportation in late 1940's and early 1950's when the life improvement activities were most actively carried out.

In late 1940's and early 1950's, forestry work such as cutting timber, collecting firewood and making charcoal, was the major industry in this village, and most men were engaged in wage labor in the forest industry. Women were engaged in agriculture, working in paddy fields in the valley and fields for other crops on the steep slopes in the mountains. The average size of paddy fields per household was 12 acres and fields for other crops, 29 acres. Because of the low productivity, the average self-sufficiency rate of rice, the staple food, was only 20%⁷. Therefore it was impossible for them to procure sufficient food without the cash income from wage labor in the forest industry. At the same time, it was also difficult for them to make a living without their subsistence crops because the average annual cash income per household in 1952 was only 70,000 yen⁸, that was very low in comparison to the average cash income per household at that time in Japan.

The population was about 400 in late 1940's and early 1950's and has declined to about 200 at present. The number of households have remained relatively constant of around 80 since the Meiji Era to the present⁹. These households have composed of legitimate

members of the village, based on common ownership and management of community property of the village forest of 108 hectares. In addition, there are six group-owned common forests that amount to about 200 hectares in total¹⁰. These households are called *ie*. Once *ie* is established, it is expected in the Japanese traditional family system to exist through the generations, succeeded by only one child in each generation. The village community is still built on close cooperation between these *ie*. Leaders of various village organizations have been elected since the end of the Second World War, by popular vote ("one vote per *ie*" rule) in the annual general meeting of villagers.

In late 1940's, women in this village were engaged in the improvement of kitchen facilities, especially the improvement of cooking stoves and the installation of tap water, glass windows and so forth. The first step of the movement was group excursions outside the village. The leader of the women's organization tried to make village women aware of the outside world and to stir up interest in their capabilities to change their less-developed living conditions in comparison to others. The leader urged them to carry out a participatory survey by themselves, checking their living conditions "with pencils in their hands", and identifying problems to be solved. Then, in order to get sympathy and cooperation from their reluctant husbands, she asked teachers of the elementary school to open night classes to make them realize that the improvement of living conditions would revitalize their energy to continue working. She also received great support from the extension workers who provided information, technology and services

appropriate to local cultural contexts.

With the consent of their husbands, the core group members soon installed new cooking stoves, and proved the energy efficiency of these stoves. According to their survey, the total amount of fuel wood consumption and days spent for its collection were reduced to one third by the installation of these new stoves. In the case of new cooking stoves, they had to spend only 20 days per year per family in comparison to 60 days in case of old cooking stoves. And reduction of firewood consumption was from 4238 kgs to 1500 kgs¹¹. This resulted in the increasing number of women who wished to install new cooking stoves.

In order to raise funds, village women worked hard in breeding such livestock as rabbits, goats, pigs and chickens. They also earned money by carrying more bundles of firewood on their shoulders than usual. They finally succeeded in obtaining credit without security from the agricultural cooperative. The nominal borrower was the village women's association and any member who ever needed supplemental money for improvement could use it. The repayment rate was very high.

Through this process, they came to have influence within their families, and gained confidence in themselves that they could make important changes if they had the will to act for change. They came to enjoy a sense of self-worth personally and socially. The whole community became actively involved in the movement after they were honored as the winner of the official prize given by the prime minister in 1953. Five thousand visitors came to this village for ten years, searching for information about their life improvement activities.¹²

Subsequently changes occurred in the physical and psychological conditions of the lives of these village women, giving impact to surrounding villages as well as being passed on to the next generation through mother-daughter or husband's mother-son's wife relationships. This transmission of the ideals of the movement continued even after the initial movement wore off because of drastic social changes occurring in rural areas.

In 1953 the recession in the timber trade began, followed in 1957-58 by the rapid drop of firewood and charcoal demand caused by the nation-wide spread of the use of propane gas cylinders¹³. It became more and more difficult to find wage earning opportunities in the forest industry inside the village. Many of younger generation chose to leave the village after completing school years in search of cash income and to live in urban areas. The population now has declined to about 200, i.e. half of what it was in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Few people of younger generation are working in the village. The old paddy fields and other farmlands that were cultivated up to the top of the mountain, are now uncultivated and abandoned or have become cedar forests which have no economic value in today's Japan.

3 Life improvement activities after rapid economic growth

During the first stage of the life improvement movement such as the movement in the case study of NANASATO-ISSHIKI, the most aspiring, passionate activities were unfolding throughout the country. Since then, activities that have developed all over Japan can be divided into the second and the third periods.

The second period extended from the beginning of 1960's to the first half of 70's and the third period extends from around 1975 to the present.

During the second period, Japan attained a high economic growth rate and became one of the world's most advanced economies. The goal of a better life was physically realized due more to the economic growth than the results of the movement. The urban-rural income gap was bridged and constraints for organizing women were considerably eased as male farmers with side jobs increased and farming work depended mostly on their wives. But there were increased medical complaints from women who overworked themselves or worked in vinyl covered greenhouses. Better work clothes for those who worked in vinyl houses and protective gear to be worn during agro-chemical spraying were devised under the program. Cooperative cooking and accounting books specifically designed for farm families were also developed.

During the third period characterized as a period of stable economic growth, rural areas have suffered severely from declining population. Young farmers remaining in rural villages now have great difficulty in finding prospective wives. Under these circumstances, the life improvement movement has shifted away from the past approach, where the emphasis was on making rural communities catch up with urban life. Instead, members of the life improvement groups have taken the initiative in starting new lifestyles. In other words, they have tried to pursue a way of life that is appropriate for a farming family and to cooperate with urban consumer groups and environmentalists. Thus, eating habits have been reviewed to encourage consumption of traditional Japanese food. Environmental

monitoring charts have been mapped out.

Activities for the improvement of women's managerial abilities, participation in management and decision making, and common ownership rights for farmlands are now being developed. Some women have their own name cards and run direct sales posts for the sale of their products on the roads side. Thus they enjoy the benefits of a disposable income, as well as the sense of self-worth through their economic autonomy. This newly developed trend seems to be an effort to raise the status of women in economic terms i.e. through the power of 'production'.

It has become more and more difficult to involve the whole village in such programs, but a few enthusiastic rural women in different villages are engaged in networking activities¹⁴. The gap between these people and other ordinary villagers is expanding.

4 Concluding Remarks

From its beginning, the HLIESP has given equal emphasis to both the increase in production and the improvement of life. This has been done within a framework of rationality and efficiency, i.e. the improvement of life based on better productivity. On the other hand, from its beginning, the program has had strategies for the democratization of rural societies and the raising of women's social status. There were leaders and catalysts who resented the oppressed situation of women and sympathized with these strategies. In Japanese societies immediately after the Second World War, there existed situations where these strategies could be shared by both the administrative side and the people's side.

Our field research illustrates the impor-

tance of; 1) leaders and catalysts who recognize both the practical and strategic needs of the local people, 2) the organization of voluntary agents as the group core, 3) the similar lower-middle class background of the core group members. Based on these social conditions, a well-balanced harmony and complementariness of the top-down and bottom-up interrelationships were realized.

One of the most important variables to ensure the sustainability of the project is the project's "social sustainability", i.e. participation, organization and continuity of agent groups. The life improvement project of this village was sustainable for the first decade. In addition, the energy and impact transmitted individually from the first generation contributed to the empowerment and development of the village women of the current generation. Although the initial group and the movement itself disappeared, it can still be regarded as another kind of sustainability.

Concerning the third kind of sustainability, i.e. sustainability of the village community, the following are pointed out.

This village has also been forced to change under a wave of urbanization through the same process that Japan's industrial structure, as a whole, has changed. Through this process of social change, the relative value of the community forest and the group-owned forest has been reduced, and the integrating function of these common properties for the villagers has also been weakened. On the other hand, the economic base supporting their family life has now moved outside the village. The village is no more a place where 'production' is carried out but a residential area for people who identify with the village. The structure of life in this village has

changed from that of late 1940's and early 1950's when it was generated and maintained through continuous interaction of 'production' and other elements of 'life'. As a result, many prospective successors to *ie* hesitate before they finally decide to settle in the village or not. This seems to be important when we think of sustainability of village community in relation to what "sustainable development" means in the process of rapid rural modernization. Sustainability of the village community might be fully achieved as far as there is continuous interaction of 'production' and other elements of 'life'

As this paper showed in the case study of NANASATO-ISSHIKI, in the first decade of the movement, the improvement of life and the increase in production interacted with each other positively in a proliferating cycle. However, in the process of social change the life improvement activities disappeared. In the surrounding villages and elsewhere throughout the country, life improvement activities have continued, taking the form of a defensive reaction against the excessive burden of agricultural production on shoulders of women. During the third period of life improvement activities in Japan, a new guiding concept of the movement is now being groped for. In the future, a new concept based on the value of 'life' as a whole is expected to be developed. This concept will not only support women's empowerment but also re-evaluate the traditional wisdom of prewar rural societies which emphasized the 'maintenance' of life as a whole rather than the 'expansion' of economy. Such developments are essential to ensure the sustenance and regeneration of an appropriate life and environment.

The basic structural principles including gender ideology have not changed much, in

spite of the strategies of the HLIESP and changes in the physical and psychological conditions concerning the lives of rural women. The new trend of the movement mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, however, comprises of the possible change in elements concerning the gender division of labor and gender ideology. We might be able to believe that the energy and impact inherited from the first generation of the movement have not ceased to exist but remain in the minds of current generations. A historical analysis relating to these gender issues will be deepened in our further research.

NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version based on the written and the oral presentations at the 21st World Conference of the Society for International Development held at Mexico City in April 1994.
2. Our research group consists of scholars and government officials, all of whom are members of the "Women in Development" section of the Japan Society for International Development. It has done field research three times as well as holding regular monthly meetings over the last three years. Our research has resulted so far in two published papers (TANIGUCHI Yoshiko, et.al.1994, and NAMAIE Akira 1994) as well as several presentations at the academic conferences (the 4th Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women in Nov. 1993, the 4th and 5th Annual Conferences of the Japan Society for International Development in 1993 and 1994, and the 21st World Conference of SID in Apr, 1994).
3. One of the examples of efforts to meet these expectations is the research carried out by Japan International Cooperation Agency,

- 1992, 1993, 1994.
4. HASUMI Otohiko 1990.
 5. GHQ, "Nomin kaiho no shirei (An Instruction on Liberation of Peasants)", 1945, 3-D-(4).
 6. The reference materials of this part are Norin-sho Fukyu-bucho Tsutatsu (1951), MURAYAMA Reiko (1992) and TABE Hiroko (1993).
 7. Ie-no-Hikari Kyokai Chosashitsu (1956) p.84, p.90.
 8. MIZUTANI Kenji (1969) p.154, UKEI Setsuko (1957) p.14.
 9. YOSHIDA Yutaka (1992) p.123.
 10. Informations based on the interview to the village head at the time of our research.
 11. Itagarasu Kyokai (1949) p.11, UKEI Setsuko (1957) p.104.
 12. YOSHIDA Yutaka (1992) p.160.
 13. Ie-no-Hikari Kyokai Chosashitsu (1956) p.85.
 14. The suggestions were given in lectures by Prof. HASUMI and Dr. TOMITA at the monthly meetings of our research group. Dr. TOMITA appreciates this trend as having the possibility to bring about a revolutionary change to Japanese rural societies.

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