

Issues and Characteristics of the Economic Activities of Women of Middle Age in Japanese Farming Villages

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Abstract

There are many economic activities run by women in Japanese farming villages that make use of home-grown agricultural products. In Japan, more than 60% of those activities is based on group management and many such enterprises has generated from activities of existing regional organizations such as the home life improvement group, agricultural co-operative women's group.

However, in recent years, activities of conventional organizations has been coming to stagnate while there is a continuing trend in the transition towards old age for those involved in economic activities. In order for businesses to continue, there is a demand for a support strategy aimed at economic activities of middle aged women. In this respect, this report will examine the characteristics of the processes of group economic activities by middle aged women the issue connected with deciding on a support strategy.

The results of the survey showed that when starting an economic activity, women of middle age do not use the conventional organization as the basis but instead lay down a new organization based around the objective of the economic activity. In effect, the economic activity is set up as a new independent unit built around processes different from the conventional organization.

Nowadays, due to stagnation of the conventional organizations, it is difficult for women to use the organization as the basis for an economic activity. Therefore, the formation of a new organizational structure aimed at economic activity and the support of such activity is the issue of a support.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in businesses that involve agricultural products processing, agricultural products sales, restaurants, etc., run by women in Japanese farming villages. Most of these economic activities make use of home-grown agricultural products and skills that women have learned in their daily lives. Such activities have been drawing attention as having a potential ripple effect on the regional economy by creating jobs and furthering the development of local special products.

Among these businesses run by women in farming villages, this report will focus on the group management structures by middle-aged women and examine the characteristics and issues concerning support for such entrepreneurs. To do so, the report will first explain the general characteristics of businesses run by women and illustrate their life-course, and the transition of the group management structures from the pre-conventional regional organizations. Second, a business establishment process model is extracted by comparing case examples of businesses run by middle-aged people and by the elderly.

2. General characteristics of economic activities

Two points can be noted as general characteristics of economic activities by women in farming villages. The first point is about management style. Group management exceeds individual management; its ratio is 60%. Most of the group-managed business activities were generated from conventional regional organizations such as agricultural co-operative women's group and home life improvement group. Farming women are the main members of these organizations. Because there are many women who gained skills through working together to grow and process various agricultural products, most of such businesses are group-based.

The second point is about the age of the entrepreneurs. The average age of the members of group management is mostly 50s and 60s. However, since 2002, the ratio of people in the 50s has been decreasing, while the ratio of those in the 60s has been increasing (Figure 1). If we define those in their 50s or under as middle-aged and over 60 years old as the elderly, we can say that the average age of entrepreneurs is rising slowly but steadily. The main factor for the rising age is the change of life-course of women in farming villages and the numbers of members who belong to conventional organizations.

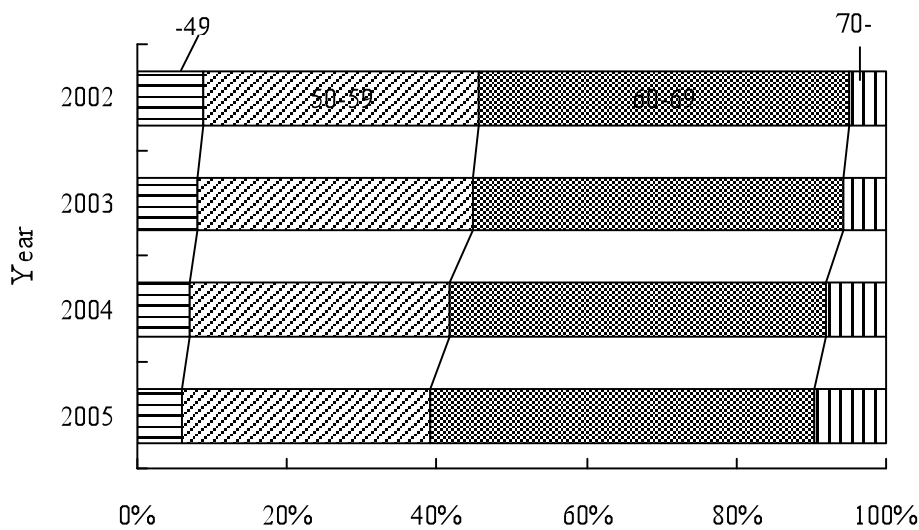


Fig. 1 The average age ratio of entrepreneurs

To start with, we will explain the change of life-course. Figure 2 illustrates the transition of job conditions of women in farming villages according to their generations. The left figure shows the life-course of women born between 1941 and 1945, who are categorized as the elderly; the right figure shows the life-course of women born between 1946 and 1950, who are categorized as middle-aged. Looking at the job conditions of women in farming villages born between 1941 and 1945, we can see that the proportion of people involved in agriculture and those not involved in agriculture are almost the same for each age. In Japan, due to the rapid economic growth since the late 1950s, the number of people not involved in agriculture has been increasing. In such social climate, the life-course of women born between 1941 and 1945 has changed from agricultural to non-agricultural work. Although no data are shown here, people born before 1935 who are in the

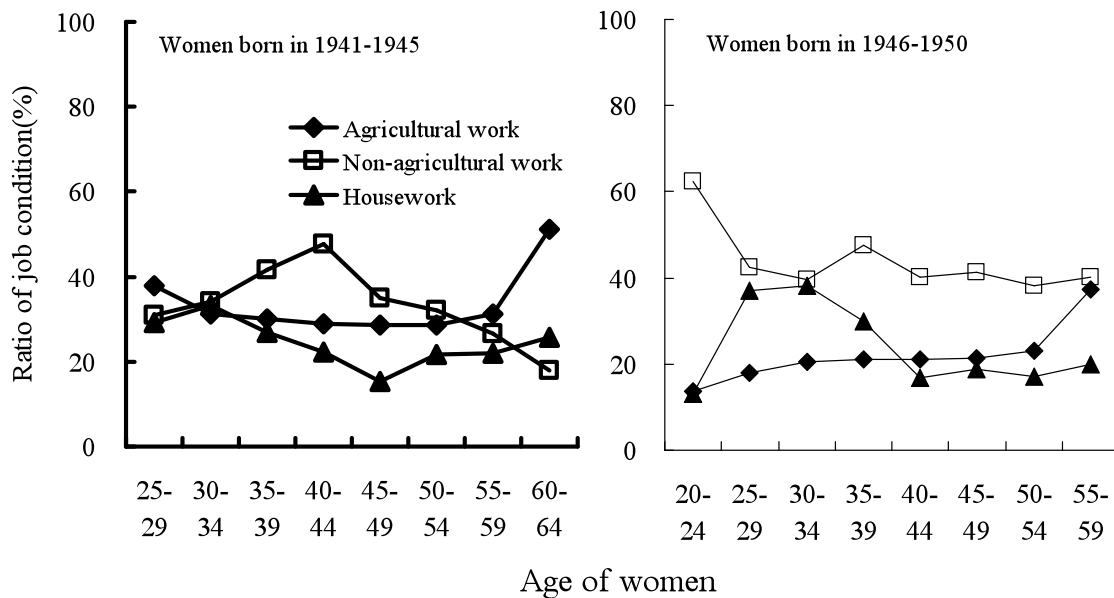


Fig. 2 Job conditions of women according to each generation

higher age range bracket had a life-course focused on farming. On the other hand, among the women in farming villages born between 1946 and 1950, the ratio of non-agricultural works was high for every age, and they had a life-course focused on non-agricultural work. We can conclude that older women have agricultural work experience, whereas middle-aged women hardly have such experience.

Explained next is the number of members of conventional organizations. Table 1 illustrates the transition of the numbers of members that belong to agricultural co-operative women’s group and home life improvement group by indexes. If we set the numbers of 20 years ago as 100, women in farming villages is -54 points, whereas agricultural co-operative women’s group is -63 points and home life improvement group -67 points. The number of members of conventional organizations is significantly decreasing compared to the population of women in farming villages. Because the life-course of middle-aged people has changed from agriculture to non-agriculture employment, and there are fewer new members from middle and young age groups who join the conventional organizations, it can be concluded that the average age of entrepreneurs is rising slowly but steadily.

In the past, related organizations such as local government offices took support measures for such entrepreneurship by approaching leaders of the

Table 1 Changes of number of members in conventional organizations

Year	Women in farming village	Agricultural co-operative women's group	Home life improvement group
1985	100.0	100.0	100.0
1990	88.1	87.6	85.3
1995	80.5	70.6	60.9
2000	73.1	52.8	47.0
2005	46.1	37.3	33.3

conventional organizations. However in recent years, there are fewer women who have farming experience and actively participate in such conventional organizations, in effect decreasing the number of women eligible for such support. Thus a new support strategy targeted for middle-aged people is now needed to support entrepreneurship.

3. Business establishment process models

Examined next is the process of business establishment by middle-aged people in comparison to that by the elderly. Regardless of business descriptions and management styles, there are five conditions required for starting a business. The first one is the motivation for starting one's own business. The second is gaining skills that are core to the economic activities and ideas which are seeds of business. The third is acquiring knowledge needed for dealing with tax and accounting matters. The fourth is securing business partners to consult with concerning management and making decisions, that is, a parenting business body. The fifth is preparing facilities such as farm stands, spaces for processing products, and procuring funds. We will compare business examples by middle-aged people and the elderly, and aim to extract business models by sorting out the processes they took to meet the requirements mentioned above.

Here is an example of production and sales of sweets made of *mochi* by Ms. A who belongs to "the elderly" age range bracket. This business group consists of 8 members, whose average age is in the 60s. The total amount of annual sales was 13 million yen. After marriage she had a non-agricultural job, but she retired in

1980 and became totally engaged in home farming. In 1994 she was the district leader of an agricultural co-operative women's group and she established a cooperative of local produce with other members of the cooperative. In those days she was not thinking of starting a business involving processing agricultural products. After participating in observation-study programs on progressive businesses run by women, planned by the agricultural cooperative or the town, and after hearing about offers made by the agricultural cooperative to provide facilities for those hoping to start a business, she became interested in starting a business of producing and selling sweets made of *mochi* in order to carry on the tradition of local food. Since she was young, she had opportunities to make sweets made of *mochi* and naturally gained processing skills. She asked other members of the agricultural co-operative women's group and made a voluntary processing group. She gained management skills such as tax and accounting knowledge after starting the business under the guidance of the agricultural cooperative.

Next is a case example of millet food restaurant by Ms. B from the middle-age group. This restaurant is also group-managed and there are 4 members. The average age is 54. The total amount of annual sales is 20 million yen. Ms B had non-agricultural employment after marriage, except during her child-raising period. She was thinking about becoming involved in food-related activities since she was young, and had a cooking license. While working at a government-related office, she came to know about local millet food and became interested in carrying on the tradition. With the help from the city, she called upon voluntary members to join a class on millet in 1996. After that they developed their skills and menu through studying and work, and researched the consumer needs. In 2002, they had a proposal from the chamber of commerce and industry, and as a subsidiary project of the national government, they prepared a facility to start their own restaurant. The members of this business are the ones who agreed to start the business during their group study period. They gained management skills such as tax and accounting knowledge after starting the business under the guidance of the chamber of commerce and industry.

Based on these case examples, we made Figure 3, which shows the process

model of businesses run by elderly women. For this age group, women who had been leaders in conventional organizations such as agricultural co-operative women's group and had gained skills and trust from others decided to start their businesses after receiving support and suggestions from their related organizations. On the other hand, for the middle-aged group, women who did not belong to conventional organizations but was motivated to start a business directly approached appropriate organizations on their own to receive support and start business activities (Figure 4).

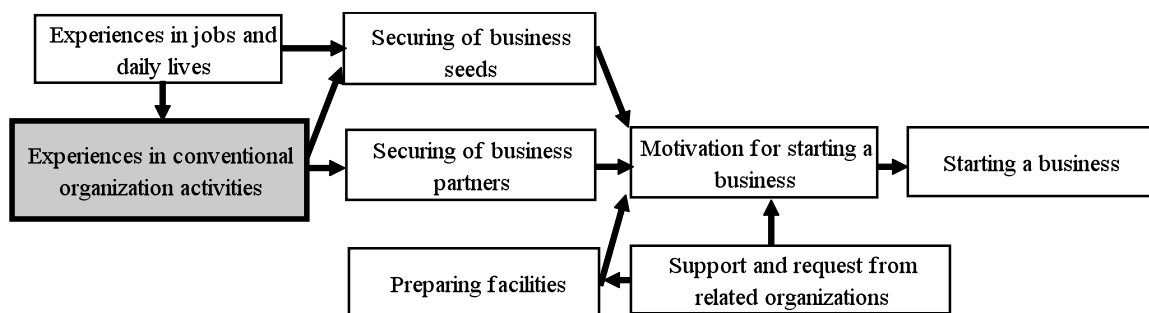


Fig. 3 Business establishment process model by old-aged women

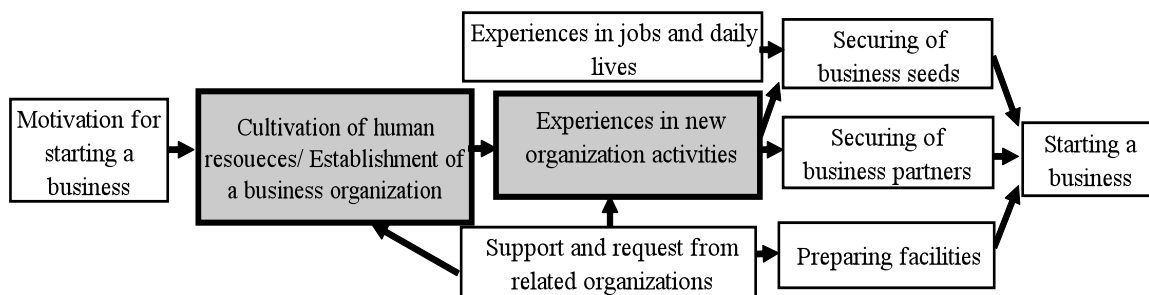


Fig. 4 Business establishment process model by middle-aged women

4. Conclusion

As mentioned before, the life-course of middle-aged women is different from that of elderly women. Middle-aged women were mainly engaged in

non-agricultural work, and they do not have much experience in activities in conventional organizations such as agricultural co-operative women's group. It is getting more difficult for them than before to become leaders in conventional organizations and secure business seeds or partners, which are essential to business activities. Instead, new organizations formed to promote businesses are playing an important role in the business by the middle-aged. A systematic process is needed for middle-aged women to establish a business organization with similarly-motivated members, and to secure business ideas and partners through activities in such organizations.

From these points, we can conclude that for elderly women, who start their economic activities in conventional organizations and use them as parental structures, traditional support measures such as approaching conventional organization leaders is more effective. But middle-aged women, with less agricultural work experience and involvement in conventional organizations, need different types of support measures. One of the features of the middle-aged women is that they gain business partners and seeds through activities in newly established entrepreneurial organizations. The following two points are raised as issues on support measures. One is to cultivate human resources among women in farming villages who do not belong to conventional organizations and want to start a business, and to help them establish a business structure. The other is to come up with support measures for leaders in newly established organizations to supplement their inexperience in their career. Leaders of newly established organizations lack experience which could have been gained in conventional organizations, where resources such as business partners and seeds can easily be found. It is considered necessary to promote organizational activities to supplement their inexperience by offering opportunities such as observing other business facilities and preparing classes on local food materials.

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