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REPORT ON THE STATUS OF AGRARIAN WOMEN WORKERS OF JAPAN

Tatsuo Midoro

I Of a total of some six million units in the present Japanese agriculture sector, the majority are small and family undertakings with an arable land of less than 2.45 acres. In this area of Japanese life, women workers are playing an indispensable role. Therefore the problem of Japanese women agricultural workers is one and the same as the problem of peasants' wives.

During the period from the Meiji era up to the 2nd World War, agriculture in Japan had been under the control of semi-feudalistic landlords who had exploited tenants as they pleased. Tenant rent amounted usually a half of crop-yield. One can even say that they were quite parasitic upon their tenants.

During the war, Japan had suffered from extreme food shortages and had been forced to complete delivery of quota rice at a low price set by the State. The agrarian land reform enforced during the period immediately after the War released tenants from semifeudalistic landlords, but could not help peasants accumulate funds enough to develop their miserably small farming units into the optimum size. Thus constant poverty in agrarian districts counts for the premodern social relations still surviving in these districts. It is only natural that the status of women as agricultural

labourers is much inferior to that of working women in other industries.

Moreover, the high rate of economic growth achieved by monopolistic capitalism in these last few years is contributing to widening the differential in earnings between workers in industry and agriculture, and a flow of labour from agriculture into industry has been going on. In addition the price received by peasants for agricultural products cannot cover their production costs while farm workers must buy other goods at regular and monopolistic market prices.

These facts have mainly brought about the situation that the earning per capita in agriculture stands at only one third of that of urban workers. However, even when people leave the land for the city, they find that working conditions in nonagricultural industries are far from satisfactory. The minimum wage system has many loopholes, the problem of the unemployed is serious and the social security system is incomplete. What farm workers employed by other industries found was that they could not support their families by their wages alone. The gradual increase in the number of part-time peasants is a natural outcome of the above situation. In turn, this increase of part-time peasants has brought about an increase in the number of

old-age and female workers in the agriculture labour forces, one of the grave issues to be solved by this sector of the economy. According to authoritative statistics, the average number of workers per farming unit stands at 2.35 persons. However, the figure for those engaged solely in farming for more than 150 days a year is 1.54 and part-time peasants who work on the fields between 60 to 149 days a year, 0.81. The same statistics based on sex are showing 1.08 for male and 1.27 for female workers. This clearly reveals that women are assuming heavier labour responsibility than men in agriculture. This characteristic is more apparent in families with members engaging in farming as their subsidiary or part-time job. The phrase "Wives' agriculture" (one may call it "Wivery" in stead of "Husbandry") seems very apt to express the state of small farm undertaking, whose labour forces consist almost solely of wives of peasants.

Under the circumstances, women members of Japanese farming households find themselves in a tight spot. They are being squeezed both by pre-modern patriarchal family system still prevailing in rural communities and the modern industrial society. This creates a serious social problem.

#### (1) Working Conditions of Women in Agriculture

According to a survey on how women in agriculture spend their time we find that they use 8 hours and 20 minutes for farming, 4 hours and 39 minutes for domestic duties, 19 minutes for taking care of babies and children, 1 hour and 9 minutes for rest and amusement and 7 hours and 20 minutes for sleeping. This was in October, one of their busiest months. In comparison, figures for February, a more leisurely month, show : 4 hours and 39 minutes for farming, 6 hours and 18 minutes for domestic duties, 42 minutes for taking care of babies and children, 1 hour and 37 minutes for rest and amusement, 7 hours and 46 minutes for sleeping. Working hours are excessively long because of family duties in addition to work in the fields, which they do just as hard as male workers.

It should be added here that these figures are only averages and thus do not fully describe the working hours of women in their busy season nor in those families with only part-time male workers. It is not at all inaccurate to presume that the majority of farming wives are working longer and are living in worse conditions than these average figure indicate. In the busy seasons of the Spring and Fall the percentage of farming households whose families work at night stands at 77 per cent and that of families who must mobilise

even their children as workers, at 38 per cent. The percentage of women in agriculture who visit doctors about problems with neuralgia or exhaustion after these seasons is 52.7.

(2) Family Problems for Women in Agriculture

It is not at all unusual for many rural workers to go to urban areas and work during the winter season from December to February. However, due to the growing differential between agriculture and industry earnings, and to the remarkable increase in cash expenditure of farming households resulting from the introduction of farm machines and modern household equipment, the period of inland emigration tends to be prolonged. The so-called "3-month widows" became 5-month widows. Now we even find a number of half year widows. This trend means a heavier work load for these widows and more tension within their families in the season.

(3) A large number of farming families in agricultural areas near cities have had their manfolk as only part-time workers, but now even wives themselves are beginning to go out to take subsidiary jobs. They must, of course, leave their children at home and this has already brought about new social problems such as various kinds of accidents, a marked fall in scholarly attainments, and juvenile delinquency. According to

the national achievement tests for primary school pupils, the national average in mathematics stands at 43.6 against 100, while in rural area the average falls to 38.6. Compared with children in towns peasants' children show a noticeable inferiority even in physical growth. The absolute shortage of nurseries in rural communities is aggravating the difficulties of young from peasants' wives.

There is no special organisation for peasants' wives. However, women's departments of agricultural cooperatives show high rates of organisation of these women. Throughout the country, about 9,300 cooperatives have women's departments with a total membership of 3,190,000. The main function of these departments is to deal with daily work of the agricultural cooperatives, and they are hardly to be called autonomous bodies for women. But, recently, they are developing into organisations where wives discuss their special problems and ways for solving them.

## II Youth and Women's Department of the All Agriculture & Forestry Ministry's Workers' Union (ZENNORIN)

Of all the organisations and government offices related to agriculture, Zennorin has the biggest number of women members. About 6,000 (10 per cent) of the total workers employed by the Ministry of

Agriculture and Forestry are women and they are organised in the Women's Department of the Zennorin. The rate of married women in the Department is 60 per cent, the average age, 30 years, and the average length of service, 10 years. In principle, there is no discrimination against women in wage rates. But in fact, the wage differential between becomes larger for women with longer duration of service as clearly shown in the following table.

<u>length of service</u>	<u>percentage of wage against men</u>
3- 5 years	96.1
10-15	84.1
20-25	73.1
More than 30	75.8

One of the main reasons for this is that wages are based on the degree of responsibilities required for the job and women are rarely given administratively high posts.

The majority of women workers are doing subsidiary jobs under the supervision of men.

With the recent enactment of the Fundamental Law for Agriculture, the organisational structure of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has been changed. But, what the reorganisation of the Ministry meant for women workers was pressure on their existing rights.

Somehow, they are not so free as before to take paid vacation, pre and post natal leaves and menstruation leave. Discrimination is also evident on wage increments and promotions and it is reported that recruitment of women workers has been abandoned. If the ILO Convention 87 is ratified, the Government intends to make certain revisions in the domestic labour laws of Japan. Women workers share the fear of men workers that these revisions will affect workers adversely.

Women workers organised in Zennorin are fighting against these repressive measures and are demanding increases in nurseries and equal opportunities to get responsible posts.

(注) 日本の農村婦人の状態にかんする、このリポートは、1960年代後半の農林労働組合インターナショナル大会に参加した全農林の大会報告のために書かれた。仲介の労をとられた長谷川武夫氏が亡くなられ、正確な年代と本報告書の処理が不明なので、本教室報を通じて公表させて戴いた。

農林労働組合インターナショナルは世界労連の産業別部門の一つで、世界の農林労働者、農業技術者、小農民が結集しており、社会主義国はもちろん、フランス、イタリー等の先進資主義国のほか、アジア、アフリカ、ラテンアメリカの農林労働者、小農民が多く加入し、その広い支持をえている。

なお、1953年大会については「世界農林労働者、農民大会報告・決議集」(日本農民組合国際部編)が五月書房から公刊されている(1955.3)。(美土路)