

Rural Life Improvement Extension Service and The Capability Approach

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Introduction

The Japanese government has offered a unique educational program called Rural Life Improvement Extension Service(RLIES)¹ for women in rural areas since 1949. It is an outstanding program in that it has enhanced women's capabilities and fostered many female leaders in rural areas. Through this program, women understand that they have choices and rights. Rural Life Improvement Extension Service is based on the idea that people (especially women) can never enrich their lives without improving their daily home lives. Economists insisted that the increase of agricultural productivity was the ultimate policy to overcome poverty. After Japan achieved high economic growth, some political leaders said that the role of this extension service was over. However, women's groups supported and continued to study because the quality of people's lives is always central to Rural Life Improvement Activities.

Rural Life Improvement Extension Service is one powerful method to address gender discrimination by getting rid of obstacles which keep women from exercising their functions. Many women lacked experience to realize their functions. Through these group activities, women learned how to take leadership by conducting meetings. Some women held a morning market with the help of livelihood extension workers and learned how to achieve a project. Now many women who studied through Rural Life Improvement Activities take initiative in local communities.

This paper shows that Rural Life Improvement Extension Service is a capability facilitating method. This paper also shows the relation between human development and the capability approach, based on a case study.

1. Background of RLIES

Rural Life Improvement Extension Service was designed to achieve two goals which seem mutually exclusive; enhancing democracy and eradicating poverty. The General Headquarters (GHQ) requested that the Japanese Government to democratize rural society by the introduction of the agricultural extension system, as well as the execution of agrarian reform and the establishment of agricultural cooperatives².

Women were the main target of this extension service. At that time, many women could read, write and calculate but their potential functioning was not fully developed. "In the traditional family-oriented society, women were expected to work as a labor force which was considered a virtue. There used to be invisible rules that prevented them from attending public meetings and participating in public activities which promoted male chauvinism (Takaoka)."

The Rural Life Improvement Division was set up in the ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 1948. The female official, Matsuyo Ohmori was appointed as the first manager. Many economists at that time believed that promoting efficiency of agriculture would reduce poverty. But Ohmori, who had studied home economics at the State University of Washington, thought "the rural life was poor because Japanese thought little of life. The idea that women were not needed to do more than housework meant that they didn't pay enough attention to life." This Ohmori's idea became the backbone of the Rural Life Improvement Extension Service and it was designed to tackle the poverty in rural areas by educating women to improve their lives.

¹ Some call it 'Home Life Improvement Extension Service(HLIES)', the other call it Rural Life Improvement Extension Service in English.

² The Agricultural Improvement Promotion Law, on which RLIES is based on, modeled after the Smith-Lever Act(1914).

Women in rural areas have been seen not only as care givers but also as farm workers with no recognition. When Japan experienced high economic growth, more male farmers began to work in non-agricultural industry and their wives had to work harder because the idea that family should preserve fields for descendants was persistent.

Unfortunately family, local community, and even government have seen them as husbands' substitutes despite women having run farming businesses. There are more women than men working in agriculture. Focusing on women who are self-employed in agriculture, the percentage is low. This is because women who have exactly the same job as men are considered as family workers.

Even if the woman is the agricultural worker in a family, the men is given membership to agricultural cooperatives, because only men are considered household representatives traditionally. The percentage of female member of agricultural cooperatives is only 12.1 percent in 1990. Although Women in rural areas had been educated and worked hard, they couldn't attend most influential organization.

Table 1-1 The percentage of Women in all workers (%)

	Workers in the non-agricultural sectors	Workers in the agricultural sectors	Self employed in the non-agricultural sectors	Self employed in the agricultural sectors
1965	36.7	52.5	31.0	20.7
1970	35.4	52.3	33.7	22.6
1975	37.4	51.1	31.3	24.6
1980	38.8	49.8	33.7	22.4
1985	39.9	49.6	35.2	19.0
1990	40.1	47.6	34.2	18.0
1995	40.5	46.1	32.6	18.8
2000	40.8	45.8	30.7	17.4
2002	40.8	44.8	28.5	14.5

Note: Data are based on the Labour Force Survey.

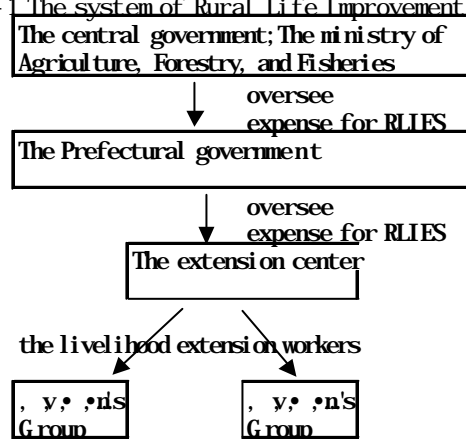
Source: Statistical Survey Department, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs Posts and Telecommunications

2. The concept of RLIES

(1) The Structure of RLIES

The Rural Life Improvement Extension Service consists of four bodies: The central government, the prefectural governments, the extension centers and women's groups. Originally, the Rural Life Improvement Division of the ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries designed RLIES national level plans and issued instructions³. The prefectural governments employed the livelihood extension workers⁴ and posted them to each extension center. The central government and the prefectural governments divided the expense for RLIES.

Figure 2-1 The system of Rural Life Improvement Service



(2) The characteristics of RLIES

³ Because RLIES were recently thought less important, the division was merged with other divisions.

⁴ The extension workers were consisted of between agricultural extension workers and livelihood extension workers. Usually, agricultural extension workers were men and livelihood extension workers were women. But most of prefectures make no difference between them now.

Rural Life Improvement Extension Service was designed to achieve two goals which seem mutually exclusive; enhancing democracy and eradicating poverty.

According to Mizuno(2002), the characteristics of RLIES are

- .the contribution of livelihood extension workers
 - .based on a thorough field-oriented principle
 - .showing results of rural life improvement activities to women's family
 - .solving problems through improvement things that already exists
 - .giving women an opportunity for creative problem-solving experience
 - .seeing farm household homemakers as individuals and organizing them into small groups
 - .using participatory rural development method
 - .long-term involvement of the policies of the ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries
- Sato(2002) also pointed out the role of livelihood extension workers and group-oriented activities as the factor of RLIES.

The core factor of Rural Life Improvement Extension Service is group-oriented activities. Women was oppressed within their family; they were supposed to work hard and the relationship with their parents-in-law was also problematic for them. When RLIES was started, women were too busy to think about their life. If they went out to somewhere else out of their field, they were blamed by not only their family but also communities. The Rural Life Improvement Activity was a good reason for them to be apart from their family and think about their problems with the people who shared same experience. As Mizuno pointed out, RLIES treated women as individuals and instructed them to organize small groups. Some women could not mention to join a women group for fear of family objection. Then livelihood extension workers persuaded families to allow women to join the group. Women gathered once a month, and learned many skills from the livelihood extension workers. The members of women's groups were eager because they voluntarily joined the groups. At first, their activities owed much to the livelihood extension workers but gradually they came to be independent. They decided what they would learn, made plans and ran the meetings. The members enjoyed to attend activities because they had their own time with the people who were in same situation.

The contribution of the livelihood workers is also an important factor of Rural Life Improvement Extension Service. They were not only experts of domestic science but also facilitators, researchers and coordinators. The livelihood extension workers sometimes did field surveys to find out what the problems were. But they always instructed the women to find out the problems. The livelihood extension workers assisted the women to have their own ideas and solve problems for themselves, by using extension methods; 1)draw attention 2)raise interest 3)expand interest 4)recognize necessities and 5)take action (Takaoka). It is important for them to have built trust with women's groups. When women's groups activities were hindered by other groups such as existing women's groups, agricultural cooperatives, the livelihood extension workers stood in the middle of them, and tried to make them understand each other.

We find that the character satisfied the principle of each person as an end (Nussbaum). As Mizuno pointed out, this program saw farm household homemakers as individuals. In particular, Rural Life Improvement Extension Service aimed to give women equal rights at home and in the community. For example, women were instructed to organize small groups to make all participants adopt a role in activities. Women were encouraged to voice their opinions and respect others' opinion in the meetings. They had several opportunities to get self-confidence by showing skills they learned at home. The women united and empowered themselves through activities. As women became empowered, the tension between them and their family might have happened. Through many experiences, Rural Life Improvement Extension Service came to make this kind of tension less severe by showing results of the activities to women's families.

(3)Some examples of the Rural Life Improvement Activities

we can understand what women wanted at that time and at the stage of their development. Rural women have learned many things through the Rural Life Improvement Activities. Because what they mainly learn is different according to when they learned it.

When the extension service started, the main interest of women was 'how to survive', 'how to live as a human being not as a tamed animal'. Initially, they learned mainly about the skills relating to hygiene and nutrition to improve their quality of life. They improved cooking stoves and work clothes, and cooked more nutritious food. They also tried to change customs which caused unnecessary hardship.

As Japan experienced high economic growth during the 1960's and the 1970's, more men came to work in the non-agricultural sector. Women had to work harder and longer to make up for men's absence. They also had to do the housework and raise the children, so that many of them had more severe health problems. Many people also worried about the harmful effects of fertilizers and chemical insecticides. Thus, women took an interest in subjects relating to time management, short time cooking and health. The Japanese government controlled the amount of rice as a food policy. The oversupply of rice became problematic and farmers were encouraged to cultivate other crops during this period. Women learned how to cook the newly introduced crops from these Rural Life Improvement Activities.

Since the International Women's Year of 1975, the idea of equal rights at home and in the community has been more focused. Women have held conferences to discuss about the role of women since then. Therefore they know the purpose of The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society⁵ (1999) and gender issues very well.

The effect of depopulation in rural areas appeared much worse, as residents became older. Gradually, the women's focus has expanded from their family and home life to communities. They applied their food processing skills to preserve local food culture. Some of them set up local food businesses. Many women's groups attended local activities like local festival and volunteer activities.

These trends form the current contents of Rural Life Improvement Activities. Women's interest is now so diversified that it is difficult to point out the most typical activity. Women learn health, food processing, gender issues, business management and so on.

Many members of women's groups have gained more self-confidence from the many activities offered. With mutual support, they also learned how to voice their opinion in public. They expanded not only their basic capability relating to life and health but also their complex capability.

In next section, I will discuss the relationship between Rural Life Improvement activities and women's development by examining a case study of the activities in Yamanashi prefecture.

3. Rural Life Improvement Activities in Yamanashi prefecture

(1) History of Rural Life Improvement Activities

Yamanashi prefecture is located next to Tokyo prefecture which has the capital city of Japan. Mountains and hills cover 77.8 percent of lands and it is famous for fruit production, such as peaches and grapes.

Almost 88 thousand people live in an area of 4.5 thousand square kilometers. Agriculture accounted for 2 percent of Gross prefectural product in 2001. 9 percent of workers are in the agricultural sector. 47.5 percent of farmers were women in 2000. Life expectancy is 85.2 years for women and 77.9 years for men.

According to the Japan Rural Life Improvement Association, Yamanashi prefecture took middle position in 2001. The number of Rural Life Improvement Groups was ranked 23 among 44 prefectures⁶. The number of Rural Life Improvement Members was ranked 29

⁵ In English, the law uses 'Gender-Equal Society', but in Japanese it is more like 'doing something together'.

⁶ There are 47 prefectures in Japan. The data of Hokkaido prefecture, Tokyo prefecture and Shimane prefecture are missed. As the number of members, Shizuoka prefecture is also missed.

among 43 prefectures. The number of Rural Life Improvement Groups is 128 and the number of members is 775 in Yamanashi prefecture in 2004. Both of these numbers represent downturns since the middle of the 1980's. This becomes problematic and I will discuss it later. Since 1949, many women's groups for Rural Life Improvement Activities were founded in Yamanashi prefecture.

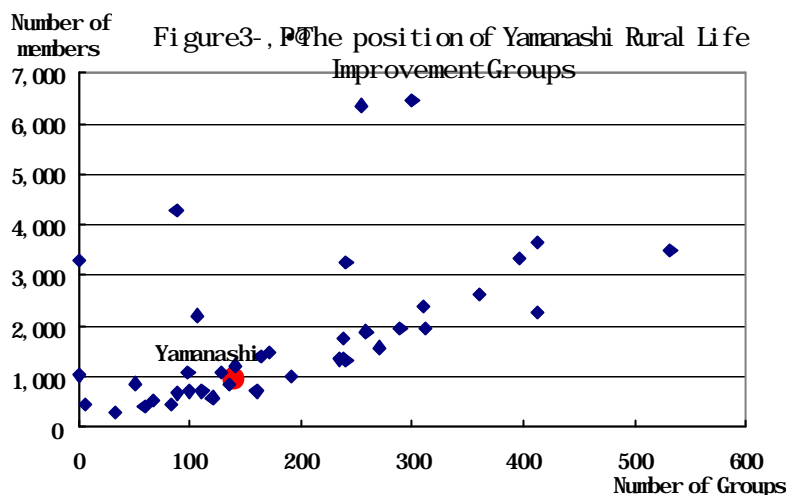
In 1953, the journal 'Nakama(friends)' was created. The Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association was organized in 1956. It holds a conference once a year to choose its leadership and to exchange what they have learned.

Many of the current Rural Life Improvement Activities, such as the leadership seminar⁷, were already formed in earlier times. The highlighted theme, however, has differed over time. As I mentioned, scientific and logical home management skills such as the improvement of food appealed to women. The number of seminars relating to health increased during the period of high economic

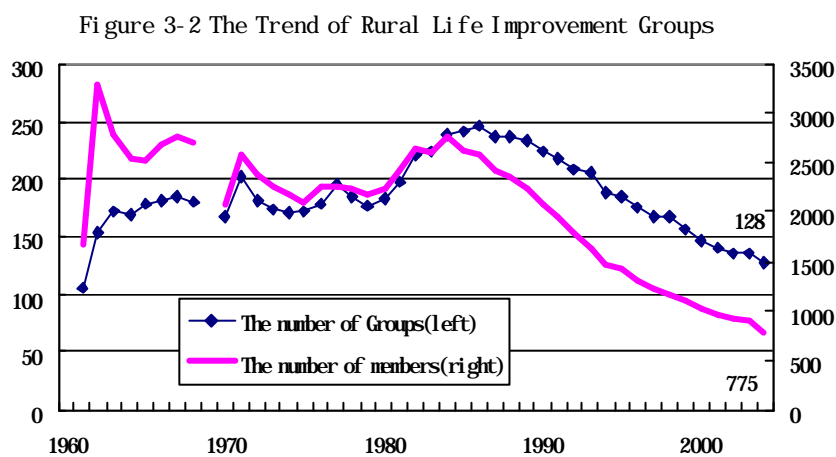
development. The Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association participated in events concerned with health promotion and panels to discuss the problems of women as a part of women's groups. Food processing using soy beans and sardines was popular in the 1970's. The Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association conducted research for 'the International Women's Year and the way of rural life' in 1976. Since then, the number of activities relating to gender issues has increased. The leaders of the women's groups came to attend public meetings and participate in public activities because the local governments of Yamanashi prefecture treated them as representatives of women in rural areas.

In the 1980's, women took more interest in processing local foods. They often held cooking contests of local food. Their point of view regarding food processing changed from cooking time-saving nutritious food to preserving their local food culture.

The Association has been commissioned to do surveys on several subjects relating to women's life since 1978. The theme of 2002 and 2003 was environment. Women thought of what they could do for the environment. They reported on the treatment of trash and recycling of



Source: The Japan Rural Life Improvement Association



Note: The data of 1969 are nonavailable.

Source: Yamanashi Prefecture

⁷ The prefectural government and the Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association jointly have held the leadership seminar for women who were and would be the leader of women's groups since 1960.

agricultural waste, cans and so on. They also recommended women to devise ways of reducing trash in order to cut government expenditures. Women also mentioned that they would ask agricultural cooperatives, suppliers, and manufacturers to take care of unused fertilizers and other waste.

The association's resolution of 2004 are .making the rural environment better to live . developing food processing and new foods using local resources .establishing networks to expand agricultural activities .finding ways through research to improve qualifications as farmers.

(2)The capabilities which women developed

The basic activities of Rural Life Improvement were very simple: Women would gather to study only a few hours once a month. Then following such meetings, they would take home the ideas which they had learned. At the next meeting, they would exchange their results. Through these simple actions, they would develop capabilities.

Women had healthy lives. They learned how to cook nutritious food using fresh foods they cultivated. They also learned how to prevent disease and how to exercise. Most of elderly members I met didn't look their ages. They were energetic and had dreams.

They expressed their emotion in activities. The member of women's groups nurtured friendship. They talked about troubles and worries with each other. Attending Rural Life Improvement Activities became a source of emotional support for them.

They enjoyed attending these friendly get-togethers. The Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association has held a potluck party once a year. They enjoy talking and exchanging recipes there. They also plan many amusing things as parts of activities. The women I met in Yamanashi prefecture told me that they felt like the members of the Rural Life Improvement Groups were like their families.

From their activities, they developed artistic talents. They often studied handicrafts. They had several opportunities to show their talents and they were happy to do so. Women often wrote poems for the journals. They also joined cooking contests.

They developed the capability to think logically because they were always trained to find and solve problems. They were encouraged to have their own opinions. They also developed the capability to speak logically. Many women hesitated to speak in public at first but they got used to it. The members of women's groups in Yamanashi prefecture had several opportunities to express what they learned and how they felt. They made presentations about how they could improve things for other women's groups. They wrote about their experiences which were recorded in the journals. Some women made speeches in national conferences. They overcame speaking in public and learned how to think and express their ideas through these activities. They learned how to negotiate effectively and harmonize different ideas. With these experiences, they grew in confidence resulting in their belief that they were in an equal partnership with their husbands.

They developed the ability to run an organizational operation. Now they are proactive in running Rural Life Improvement activities: raising funds and doing paperwork. They also attend a wide variety of Activities, such as morning markets and local volunteer activities. They do research to sort out problems and round up results. Some women set up food businesses applying know-how they learned.

Recently, their roles in community have widened. They attend public meeting as representatives of women. They approach organizations such as agricultural cooperatives and local government to accept their requests. They increased their political influence on their communities.

They came to get financial independence. They leveled up their agricultural and management skills. By doing so, they developed ability to earn money. They also learned cash management regarding to their life span. They got control of cash flow by studying bookkeeping. They didn't separate their money from family expense before. Now they have their own savings⁸.

(3)A leader of the Rural Life Improvement Group

I interviewed the leader of a Rural Life Improvement Group in Yamanashi prefecture in 2004. She is an energetic and open-minded person. She cultivates 13 varieties of groups and

⁸ Many of them, however, don't have lands and buildings in their names.

gets orders from consumers. She takes pride in working as much as men do.

She was highly-educated in her generation because she graduated high school although most other women didn't. She worked as a local official but quit when she married. She began to live with her husband and her mother-in-law. At that time, marrying men who lived in rural areas meant that women would work in the family business generally this was farming. She wanted to study something to improve her qualification as a farmer. As a result of the advice of a livelihood extension worker, she formed a Rural Life Improvement Group.

Those days, women were considered strange by fellow villagers, if they wandered far from home. Therefore, the member of her group always paid attention to time. They had to go home as soon as the meeting was over. It was hard to make time for the meetings for those who did chores, raised children and worked in fields.

The Rural Life Improvement Activities were worth attending because she could get a wide variety of information. In particular, the agricultural information the extension workers conveyed was very important. The most impressive study was the seminar presented by the Bank of Japan, which her extension worker arranged for them. The lecturer was sent from the Bank of Japan and taught them life planning and cash management in order to promote savings. She learned bookkeeping as a tool of cash management. This seminar was very beneficial for her because at the time her mother-in-law suggested that she take over the family budget. She had to manage family's money from then on. She made rough estimate before but improved cash flow by keeping account. Therefore, she got perspective of future and began to save money.

Her ability as a leader was constantly fostered by seminars offered by the Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association and the Yamanashi prefecture. She attended female leadership seminars. She discussed women's problems with participants on the first day, and visited a famous company on the second day. She met many leaders who would be her role models.

These activities increased her concerns about gender problems. She won the highest award of the essay contest of gender equality in 1994. She became the president of the committee for rural women from 1994 to 2001. In 1996, the president of the Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association, the head of female meetings of agricultural cooperatives and she asked the agricultural committee to give women membership. As a result, 3 women were appointed members of the committee. In 1999, they also visited many areas to make women members of the committee. As a result, in 2002, 50 women worked as members of the committee.

She still devotes herself to open a way for women from the conviction that women's power is needed to develop rural villages. Teaching children about life through agricultural work is an important part of vitalization. She thinks that women can contribute an important role because they are knowledgeable the local foods and agriculture.

She said, 'Women followed men and complained after things were decided in the past. But now, it is natural for women to attend public meetings and participate in public activities. Women have to take equal position as a next step. People say that women are incapable of putting their ideas together. But, I think that the reason why women are not good at thinking and speaking logically is that they weren't given opportunities to attend an official meeting. If they are given opportunities, they will learn by process.'

She feels that things are changing by reflecting on women's point of views in public meetings. She worked as an agricultural adviser and retired in her 60's. When she joined the re-union party of agricultural advisers, male ex-advisers were grateful to her for making them understand women's point of views. She often told them how important their wives were for them and their families by saying that not only was it hard to cultivate fields alone, but it was also a blessing with their wives help.

4. Recent problems

Unfortunately, Japan has not appreciated the importance of the Rural Life Improvement Extension Service and the women's groups so far. After Japan achieved high economic growth, some political leaders said that this extension service's role was over. The central government has cut the expenditure on Rural Life Improvement Extension Services since the 1980's. They didn't do anything to compensate it. The division of Rural Life Improvement Extension Service in the ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries was merged with other divisions. As a result, the

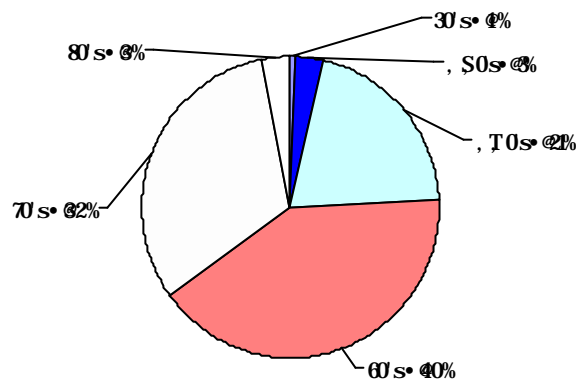
number of livelihood extension workers decreased. The government also instructed the livelihood extension workers to do the same jobs as the agricultural extension workers do. In many prefectures, there isn't an extension worker who commits only to Rural Life Improvement Extension Service.

One reason that the ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries doesn't pay attention to the Rural Life Extension Service is that it is difficult to evaluate its effects by existed ways. For example, the internal development of women is difficult to understand. Even if it is possible to understand, the ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries doesn't regard it because the ministry seems too concerned about the performance of agriculture more than the quality of life in rural areas. People tend to evaluate performance of policy in short time, although it takes a long time to see the effect of the Rural Life Extension Service. For example, women began to take initiatives after they experienced many things. Most women didn't have the opportunities to improve their capabilities while they raised children, but Rural Life Extension Service gave women the chances.

The ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries are currently eager to foster women's business promotion in rural areas. It is much easier to evaluate this policy than the Rural Life Extension Service because the ministry can get data easily in numbers such as sales, profits, and number of employees. Ironically, 70 percent of women's business was set up by women's groups and 58% of them were the Rural Life Improvement Groups (Iwasaki). It should be recognized that this successful increase in women's business promotion is based on the gradual experience in leadership skills.

Women's groups are about to disappear in many prefectures. It is mainly because the number of young people is decreasing in rural areas. Young people don't enter the existing women's groups nor organize new groups. For example, the participation rate to Rural Life Improvement Groups of female farmers is decreasing. Although 6.3 percent of female farmers in Yamanashi prefecture were members of women's groups in 1985, 3.8 percent female farmers were members of them in 2000. As a result, majority of members of women's groups are in their 60's and 70's.

Figure 3-3 Age Composition of members of the Rural Life Improvement Groups in Yamanashi Prefecture(2003)



Source: The Report of The Yamanashi Rural Life Improvement Association

This fact doesn't mean that women don't need the Rural Life Extension Service. According to the survey of 'employment structure and participation of women' by the ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 2003, 28.7 percent of women answered that they didn't have chance to get any information about support for empowerment when they were asked what was an obstacle of women's equal participation to farm management. 24.8 percent of women felt that they didn't have any chance to study agricultural skills and farm management. It appears that most young women seem that they don't know what the Rural Life Extension Service is for them these days.

5. Conclusion

Rural Life Improvement Extension Service has long history in Japan. The core factor of Rural Life Improvement Extension Service is group-oriented activities. Women decided what they would learn. Through Rural Life Improvement activities, women found what they were able to do and to be. They got self-confidence and their interest widened. In Yamanashi Prefecture, women had changed the existing system after they experienced many things. The

experience of Rural Life Improvement Extension Service in Japan shows that human development contributes to enhance democracy.

The effect of Rural Life Improvement Extension Service can't be understood without the capability approach. We should see not only data of the policy but the also the process and results.

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