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LESSONS

Women's empowerment in agriculture a key to **SUCCESS**

A discussion on the importance of empowering women in rural agri-homestay and farm stay tourism in Sri Lanka in the backdrop of effective implementations of women's empowerment in agriculture in Japan

(By Harsha Udayakantha Peiris – Editor in Chief – SRI LANKA THE TREASURE ISLAND – the international travel and tour magazine)



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Japan's programmes to empower women in agriculture and farm industry have boosted numerous potentials to effectively identify their talents, skills and abilities to develop Japanese agriculture sector fruitfully. The different segments and elements in these programmes and sectors offer detailed information how such procedures could be effectively utilized in agriculture industry and its related segments like rural agri- home-stays and farm-stays in Sri Lanka.

Eri Ohtsu born in Germany and grown up in Tokyo who has obtained a Master of Science Degree at the Technical University of Munich says that agriculture and farming in Japan has created beautiful landscapes kept by farmers for ages. "So today, keeping the landscapes through traditional family farming is an innovative approach that encourages towards healthy living. For me, and every other woman engaged in farming in Japan, it has become a stress free life. And after farming over ten years, we are feeling rich, close to fields, it gives us fresh water and vegetables, there's no work after sunset and it has made our whole family live together," she says. Empowering women through agriculture has showcased value of rural life in Japan.

The 41 year old Eri Ohtsu at O2 Farm is the Head of the group of all women networked named Heroines for environment (HERS) which was established in 1994 and gained non-profit organization status in 2002. HERS which used to be led by people in their 60s

and 70s recently shook up its management, and members below 40 now hold all eight seats on the executive board. "HERS acts to build a sustainable society. Instead of merely hiding behind public funds, we will empower women farmers so that we can pave the way to better agriculture ourselves," she says. Ohtsu, a mother of three who grows rice in Aso, Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan believes the future of farming lies in diversification, specifically, community electricity generation using biomass and other energy sources.

"Accounting for roughly half of the population engaged in farming in Japan, women play an important role as propagators of agricultural, forestry and fisheries industries. Compared to management with no women, management units with core women mainly engaged in farming tend to have larger sales volumes and to work for business diversification. Management with women board members and managers tend to have increased sales and earning capacity to management with no women. Every year, there is an increase in rural women's involvement in starting businesses, such as



Kazue Sato, Director – Woman and Elder Affairs Office, Agricultural Human Resources Development Division, Management Improvement Bureau, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Japan



Eri Ohtsu at O2 Farm also Head of the group of all women networked titled Heroines for Environment (HERS), Japan



Dr. Wijaya Jayatilaka, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Agricultural Extension of the Faculty of Agriculture – University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

making specially processed goods using local farm products and selling them at farm stands in Japan," Kazue Sato, Director – Woman and Elder Affairs Office, Agricultural Human Resources Development Division, Management Improvement Bureau, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Japan says.

Several other programmes such as 'Nougyo – Joshi project' (Nougyo: Agriculture, Joshi: Women) implemented in Japan at present, are making female farmers' presence enhanced in not only agricultural society but also society in general. The programmes inspire female farmers to develop their agricultural and management skills through collaboration with other industrial companies. They also make agricultural industry popular among young female generation as to be one of the occupational choices.

To help regional women entrepreneurs achieve marked progress, the National Network Connecting Women Workers Engaged in Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries nick named Hime-Collabo was set up in October 2012 in Japan to achieve business development by establishing a mutual network of women entrepreneurs, creating cross-industry associations, and holding workshops for information exchange. Hime-Collabo has called for various industrial fields and private companies to be involved in the network so that they can enjoy new business partnerships, information exchanges, interaction and cooperation. The programmes are further promoting gender equality in agricultural communities based on the Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society and the Basic Act on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas. They are also making efforts to achieve the tangible appointment of women in Japan Agricultural Cooperatives (JAs) and agricultural committees to 'resolve the problems of organizations with no women.'

These innovative procedures and implementations were broadly discussed at a special session held at the Multicountry Observational Study Mission on Best Practices in Promoting Innovation and Productivity in Agriculture For Mass Media Practitioners held in Tokyo Japan last year. The programme was sponsored and organized by the Asian Productivity Organization (APO) in Japan.

Japanese implementations to empower women in rural agriculture teach important lessons to systematically empower the rural women folk engaged in a major portion of rural agriculture and related segments in Sri Lanka.

The involvement of women in promoting rural, agri-home-stay and farm-stay tourism in Sri Lanka is vital. Yet, we need systematic improvements to effectively identify their potentials and meaningfully utilize them in rural agri-tourism and agri-home-stay programmes in Sri Lanka. This should further develop visibility of women's affairs and their involvement in this segment of tourism industry in the country. It was only in the past that, in families relying on agriculture, women were in charge of weeding and help with the harvest but now they have become the main role players in rural-agri tourism. The authenticity of cuisine hospitality at traditional rural agriculture is preserved to those of best standards to date, for their culinary expertise in preparing wholesome, healthy and tasty traditional Sri Lankan dishes. But have they been rightly empowered, identified and compensated for this?

" We need to develop a sound knowledge base as evidence of women's work and economic and social contributions made to the industry. This may be qualitative or quantitative – surveys and case studies, testimonies, and narratives will be most useful. Time budget studies, decision analysis are also possibilities," says Dr. Wijaya Jayatilaka, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Agricultural Extension of the Faculty of Agriculture – University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

Dr. Jayatilaka says that the key stakeholders including women



Empowered and enthusiastically engaged in agri-business. A group of women members at the Cherry Center, a Community farm direct Shop at Nambu Town in Aomori Prefecture, Japan, serving a local customer at its farmers' cooperative-running shop. (Pic by Rann Reuy - Cambodia Television Network - CTN)



Foreign journalists at the APO Multicountry Observational Study Mission on Best Practices in Promoting Innovation and Productivity in Agriculture in Japan For Mass Media Practitioners listening to a woman representative at the Cherry Centre at Nambu Town in Aomori Prefecture. Empowering women for agriculture in Japan has made them strong personalities to fruitfully engage in the industry and agri business. (Pic by Rann Reuy- Cambodia Television Network - CTN)

in their diverse roles must be mapped, so that their relationships to the other key stakeholders can be assessed. The mapping must also be accompanied with a good analysis of the power relationships and therein the influence or the lack of it that women have in strategic and routine decision making in their own enterprises as well as in the institutional structures that support the industry." An appraisal of the institutional, programmatic and policy interventions or the lack of it and the space that is occupied by women in these entities need to be assessed for a good understand of the context. The knowledge generated must be shared with women who may be targeted in the home-stay programme. Appropriate creative and pedagogical methods are needed to be used to disseminate the information," he states.

In a special discussion with the international travel and tour magazine 'SRI LANKA THE TREASURE ISLAND' on empowering women in agri-home-stay and farm-stay programmes, Dr. Jayatilaka stresses the point that Women must occupy a central place in planning and benefiting from the endeavor of Homestay.

"Often women are neither aware of the role and the important contributions they make nor their potentials. They must be sensitized to their own importance and will need a made in their attitudes and beliefs especially self-worth. These interventions must be evidence based and not as training and awareness programs conducted by 'experts' but by guided self-awareness exercises.

Appropriate programmers must be anchored in institutions that will have a long term vision to engage for women's development. Such efforts must be adequately financed and with competent and sensitive professionals. The numerous women's organizations available at grass roots regions and at national level have the potential and also the experience in women's development and empowerment they can be effectively made partners in this effort.

There are numerous rural women's organizations that are functioning in a stable and sustainable manner. Based on an analysis of their work and potential, while ensure that

the 'do no harm principles' are adhered to, they can be made effective partners in a proposed women's empowerment or strengthening Homestay programmes," he points out.

In a programme of moving women from exposure, awareness, internalization and empowered decision making – interventions and engagements that are progressively effective in learning need to be adopted. Such a transformative process needs to be designed, pilot tested, modified and implemented.

"Encouraging women who will start agri-home-stay and farm-stay programmes as an enterprise to form groups federate and run their affairs professionally will require a medium/long term effort to be nurtured and supported externally.

Such efforts may include exposure visits, exchange programmes, and case studies and interaction with role models. Videos of actual agri-home-stay and farm-stay case studies from other countries as well as Sri Lanka will be direct and convincing evidence for potential Homestay entrepreneurs.

Formal training certification of competencies and adhering to quality standards may also need to be planned and offered," Dr. Wijaya Jayatilaka says.