

Empowerment of Women through Pre-farming Careers in Rural Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how women's pre-farming careers affect the development of their individual activities and their empowerment. Japanese rural women used to work in agriculture under patriarchy and therefore did not have any decision-making authority. Nowadays, rural women have a variety of non-agricultural knowledge, which they acquired well before entering agriculture. It is assumed that their pre-farming careers boosted women's empowerment such as startup women's activity with own free will. To verify this assumption, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven rural women entrepreneurs who had non-agricultural experiences before entering agriculture. From our results, we conclude that women's pre-farming careers have the following two positive effects: (1) Rural women acquire decision-making right by using their savings from their pre-farming careers for the initial investment of their individual activities; (2) Any kinds of the women's pre-farming careers – even if they are non-agricultural experiences and skills – are easy to be used in public relation, negotiation, and selling of their individual activities.

Keywords: Individual activity, Japan, pre-farming career, rural women entrepreneurial activity, women's empowerment, web-based group

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Gender equality is of great importance in the world. In Japan, women in rural areas play an essential role. Fifty years ago, rural women were considered a labor force who helped with family farming, but their

viewpoints were not accepted, especially in family agriculture. However, rural women succeeded in improving their position in family farm management through women's entrepreneurial activities (Tsutsumi, 2010). These activities not only include assisting in primary agricultural production, but also value-adding through food processing, establishing restaurants, and food education. Women, through these activities, utilize their housework experiences. Women have advanced into society thanks to housework simplified by the home appliance revolution over the past 50 years (Tsutsumi, 2000). The number of women accounts for approximately 50% of the total farming population (Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries [MAFF], 2018), and the importance of women's workforces has been recognized and considered as being equivalent to that of men (Hara-Fukuyo & Ouchi, 2012).

The MAFF started to support rural women's activity to pursue their economic independence and empowerment. In order to strengthen the support, MAFF named it "Rural Women's Entrepreneurial Activity (RWEA)" to make clear their position in the agricultural system and to offer more support to their activities (Joseini Kansuru Bijon Kenkyukai [Society for the Study of Women's Vision], 1992). MAFF's target was mainly women's traditional groups such as the women's unit from the already established agricultural cooperative association. Under MAFF's support, the traditional group performs the same

activities in cooperation with the group's members. The number of RWEAs recently reached approximately 10,000 (MAFF, 2017). These activities helped to solve social problems, particularly women's economic independence, and to promote women's empowerment. Nowadays, it has become the hub for social enterprise in regional activation (Sawano, 2012).

Rural women improve their empowerment through RWEAs; however, they still are not equal to men in terms of obtaining decision-making rights in agricultural management and borrowing from banks due to low retention of fixed assets (Egami, 1997). For this reason, it is considered difficult for rural women to start-up entrepreneurial activity by the individual. Although, recently the number of individual activities has increased since 2000 which is also supported by MAFF (Figure 1). We hypothesized that their savings, which are obtained from their pre-farming careers, encourage them to start-up their individual activity. Figure 2 illustrates that most rural women in recent years had pre-farming careers, with more than 65% of rural women aged between 30-50 years moving into farming after having worked outside of agriculture. For that reason, rural women have savings and diverse skills resulting from differing pre-farming careers.

Therefore, in this study, we focus on how to use rural women's pre-farming careers in their RWEA each step and the effect of women's empowerment.

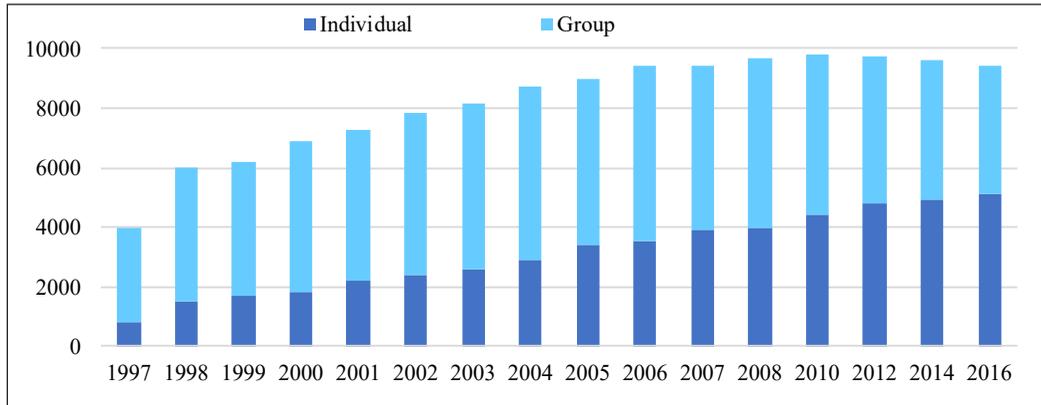


Figure 1. Number of rural women entrepreneurial activities in Japan
Source: MAFF (2017)

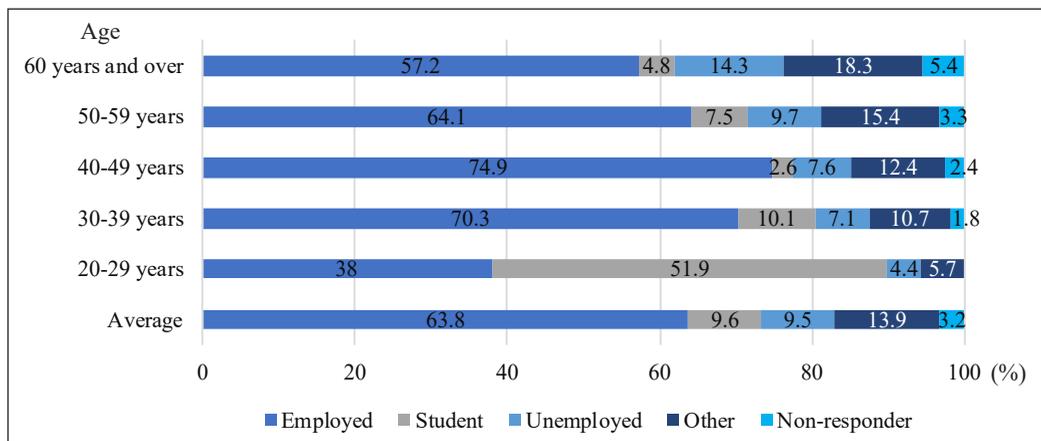


Figure 2. Pre-farming careers of rural women
Source: MAFF (2013)

Related Work

This section relates preceding studies with our study from the viewpoint of the utilization of former careers.

Effect of Women’s Former Careers in Non-Agricultural Businesses. Boeker and Fleming (2010) mentioned that past work experiences in the same industrial area gave a positive effect on the credibility and expertise of entrepreneurs. However, they

did not take women’s work position into account.

Taniguchi (2002) showed women’s former careers promoted entry to self-employment by examining the process of transition into self-employment. Xavier et al. (2012) also showed that women entrepreneurs used their previous job experiences in their small or medium businesses. The target of these studies is entrepreneurial women who made a

change from salaried employment to self-employment. They have not focused on agricultural businesses, which is in a different situation from ordinal businesses (Kagawa & Oda, 2008). We explore the effect of women's former careers in the agricultural individual business.

Effect of Women's Pre-Farming Careers in Agriculture. In the research on the effect of rural women's pre-farming careers in agricultural management, Katakura (2007) mentioned that their pre-farming careers effectively improved family farming. He also pointed out that the pre-farming careers were used especially in marketing and financial management. Hara-Fukuyo (2009) claimed that rural women starting individual activities were more accessible than before due to their various skills.

From these studies, it is presumed that women's pre-farming careers have a positive effect on the development of rural women entrepreneurial activity. However, they do not mention what kind of job experiences could be used at which step of women's entrepreneurial businesses. From these preceding researches, in this study, we discover how the pre-farming careers of rural women are helping improve individual activities and whether it is connected to promoting women's empowerment.

METHOD

To clarify how women's pre-farming careers affect individual activities, and whether it promotes rural women's women empowerment, we focused on the following

two points: First, the effect of women's pre-farming careers on improving their individual activities, and second, the outcome of Saitama career-up program and the current required support. To further understand these points, we selected a method of semi-structured interviews which could produce rich and detailed data sets offering an accurate assessment of the characteristics of individuals and phenomena (Drever, 1995; Fallon, 2008). Therefore, we conducted the semi-structured interviews in Saitama prefecture with seven interviewees. Table 1 summarizes interviewees' age, the situation of entry to farming, marital status, major crops, acreage, and contents of activity. The interviewees participated in the "Saitama Career-up program for agricultural women," the details of which will be given later in this paper. The survey period was from September to November 2017 for 1.5 to 2 hours per person. The contents of the interviews were composed of the following 12 points: (1) Academic and career background, (2) Encounter with agriculture, (3) Who decided to start, (4) Concrete activity, (5) Technical acquisition, (6) Initial investment, (7) Operating fund, (8) Number of women entrepreneurial activity employees, (9) Sales amount, (10) Participation background of the support program, (11) Acquired support, and (12) Facing problems.

For the survey Saitama prefecture was selected, which is located near Tokyo. There is a connection with Tokyo by public transportation. The prefecture started support for the RWEAs by launching the

Table 1
Profiles of interviewees

Name	Age (Actas)	Entry to Farming	Marital Status	Major Crops	Crop Acreage	Activities
A	50s	New Entry	Common Law	Green Onion	20a	Pickles Production, Negotiation, Selling, Public Relations
B	50s	Subsequent of Parents	Married	Tomato	30a	Negotiation, Selling, Public Relations
C	40s	Through Marriage	Married	Rice, Pear	16ha	Baked Sweets Production, Negotiation, Selling, Public Relations
D	40s	Through Marriage	Married	Cyclamen	5,000Pots	Negotiation, Selling, Public Relations
E	40s	Inheritance	Single	Seasonal Vegetables	Unclear	Jam Production, Negotiation, Selling, Public Relations
F	50s	Through Marriage	Married	Rice, Vegetables	Unclear	Seasoning Production, Negotiation, Selling, Public Relations
G	40s	New Entry	Married	Rice	28ha	Sake Production, Negotiation, Selling, Public Relations

Career-up program for agricultural women (Saitama Career-up program) in 2016. This program targets motivated agricultural women who can be the next-generation leaders. This program comprises ten rounds of five lectures, four study tours with well-established rural women entrepreneurs, and a final session where participants present their activity plans created in the program.

Table 2 indicates the lecture schedule that the majority of the lectures are devoted to learning product development, marketing methodology, and case studies of the well-established rural women's entrepreneurial activities. Study tours were conducted with successful women entrepreneurs on their concrete activities along with a question-and-answer session with the

Table 2
Lecture schedule of Career-up Program

No.	Contents
1st	How to set up a management strategy Creating a business plan Product development and marketing method
2nd	Public Relations methodology Utilization method of SNS How to approach the 6-sector industrialization
3rd	Learning design and information dissemination skills Basic PowerPoint skills
4th	Basic knowledge of food processing Creating a business plan exercise – 1
5th	Creating a business plan exercise – 2 Business plan feedback

Source: Saitama Prefecture (2017)

participants. After the ten lecture rounds, the participants presented their plans, while the prefecture invited some companies of the same prefecture to facilitate collaboration with them.

RESULTS

We summarized the results in the following two points:

Effect of Pre-Farming Careers on Individual Activity

Table 3 covers the academic backgrounds and pre-farming careers of the interviewees. It shows that three interviewees graduated from university, three from junior college, and one from agricultural high school. All interviewees have had pre-farming careers.

We summarized each interviewee’s answer related to their pre-farming careers and entrepreneurial activities.

Person A was formerly a negotiator in pub and antenna shop management. She said that she had already grasped the flow of negotiation and the target topics of the conversation, so the negotiations in the

entrepreneurial activity advanced smoothly. Additionally, she said that the knowledge of food safety and hygiene she obtained through pub management was also useful in the aspects of the entrepreneurial activity related to food processing.

Person B acquired basic PC skills from her work experience as a clerk at the leasing company. She said that she used these skills in the process of mass-producing labels for commodities for public relations.

Person C acquired agricultural knowledge from her university education. She said that knowledge was useful when selling her products, specifically when describing the differences and features of various breeds to her customers. In addition, she had previous work experience as a local government officer and utilized the knowledge obtained there in the acquisition of business funding and the application for subsidies from the local government.

Person D said that the basic knowledge related to PCs she obtained from her experience as a bank officer was useful in creating promotional materials.

Table 3
Pre-farming careers of interviewees

Name	Academic Background	Pre-farming Career
A	University Graduate (Literature)	Pub Management and Service, Antenna Shop Management, Publishing Free Papers
B	Junior College Graduate (Childhood Education)	Office Work
C	University Graduate (Agriculture)	Local Government Officer
D	Junior College Graduate (Law)	Bank Officer
E	University Graduate (Engineering)	Mechanic Design
F	Agricultural High School Graduate (Food Science)	Food Company, Short-time Job in Foreign Country, Office Work
G	Junior College Graduate (Art)	Backpacking, Waitress

Person E said that the design techniques she learned at her university were similar to those used in product development; therefore, the experiences helped improve her performance of the activity. Moreover, the practical knowledge related to the product testing and product improvement was also useful for her activity because it had similarities with the trial production and improvement of food processing. She was formerly a mechanical designer at a major camera company, and the experience of designing using special software helped in her creation of promotional materials.

Person F said that the knowledge of food science was useful in the development of foods using vegetables from her home garden, food processing methods using fermentation, and descriptions of product characteristics for the customers. In addition, she acquired an active posture through a short-time job in a foreign country. She said that she was able to actively contact the relevant agencies when planning her

entrepreneurial activities because of her experience. Moreover, she obtained basic PC skills from her experience working in an office, which she was able to utilize in the accounting aspects of her role.

Person G said that the knowledge related to choosing colors that attracted customers was useful when she created promotional materials for her activity, for example, hand-written advertisements and pamphlets. She also had experience working as a waitress, which helped her to grasp customer needs during the sale. Moreover, she said that her experiences backpacking broadened her horizons and contributed to the development of her entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, her experiences also improved her communication skills, which enabled her to maintain a positive attitude in the face of adversity.

Based on these results, we created eight career experience classifications (Table 4); subsequently, we determined which of the skills learned in their pre-

Table 4
Pre-farming career classification

Pre-farming Career Classification	Utilization of Pre-farming Careers
Management	Negotiation experience is useful during discussions at the start-up time
Service	Customer observation ability helps to meet needs
Desk Work	Basic PC skills are helpful in accounting and in creating PR material
Art	Aesthetic sense is useful for PR material and store display
Food and Agriculture	Basic knowledge is useful for food processing and PR statements
Engineering	Manufacturing basics and advanced PC skills are used for product developments and PR material
Government Employee	Acquisition of business development seeds and creation of application materials can be done smoothly
Foreign Experience	Dynamic attitude and extensive view are useful for entrepreneurial development

farming careers were easy to apply in their entrepreneurial activities (Table 5). The entrepreneurial activities are divided into six categories: planning, product development, food processing, public relations (PR), negotiation, and selling.

For this visualization, we gathered that their pre-farming careers were utilized at various points in their entrepreneurial activities, even the knowledge gained is different from agriculture. Especially, pre-farming careers that are related to agriculture or production knowledge tend to be utilized in planning, product development and food processing relevant to agriculture. Meanwhile, non-agricultural careers tend to be utilized in the category of public relations, negotiation, and selling.

Table 5
Effect of women entrepreneurs' pre-farming careers

Activity Categories	Effective Pre-farming Career
Planning	Service
	Government Employee
	Foreign Experience
Product Development	Engineering
	Food and Agriculture
Processing	Engineering
	Food and Agriculture
Public Relations	Art
	Engineering
	Food and Agriculture
	Office Work
Negotiation	Management
Selling	Service
	Food and Agriculture

Table 6 summarizes the business aspect of the interviewees' activities based on their response, and highlights the following points:

Their activities, operated by one to five people, indicate that they are not large as compared to other Japanese entrepreneurial activities. Six of the seven people decided to start the activities of their own free will. Five of the seven people aimed to earn extra income for the family agricultural business, not for their economic independence. The activity's sales volume reveals two patterns in their utilization of operating funds: to support their entrepreneurial activity or to earn extra income for their family farm. The purpose of the women's entrepreneurial activities was economic independence, however, nowadays, the purpose is changing to earning extra income for their family agricultural business. The three interviewees utilized their savings for their activity's initial investment. The savings were made possible through the earnings from their pre-farming careers. From the above results, we can conclude that utilizing their savings for the initial investment led to an easier start for their activities and strengthened the rights related to decision-making that they exercised during the activities themselves.

Activity Development Through the Saitama Career-Up Program

In this subsection, the interviewees' answers are summarized on how the Saitama Career-up program — the details of which have been explained in section 2 — helped develop participant activities.

Table 6
Summary of respondents

Name	Entrepreneurial Activities	Number of Entrepreneurial Employees	Sales Amount	Who decided to start	Aim of the Activities	Initial Investment	Operating Fund
A	Processing Food, Selling, PR	1	Approximately One Million Yen	Herself	Extra Income for Own Farming	Personal Saving by Pre-farming Career	Entrepreneurial Activity Profits
B	Selling, PR	1	Unclear	Herself	Extra Income for Family Farming	Agricultural Management Income	As a Division of Agricultural Management
C	Farmers' Market, Processing Food, Selling, PR	3	Approximately One Million Yen	Herself	Extra Income for Family Farming	Personal Savings by Pre-farming Career	Personal Saving and Activity profits
D	Selling, PR	1	Unclear	Herself	Extra Income for Family Farming	Agricultural Management Income	As a Division of Agricultural Management
E	Processing Food, Selling, PR	1	Approximately 1.5 Million Yen	Herself	Farm Land Preservation	Personal Savings by Pre-farming Career	Personal Saving and Activity profits
F	Processing Food, Selling, PR	1	Unclear	Husband's Recommendation	Extra Income for Family Farming	Agricultural Management Income	As a Division of Agricultural Management
G	Food Education, Selling, PR	5	Unclear	Herself	Food Education	Unclear	Profit of Entrepreneurial Activity

Table 7 summarizes how the Saitama Career-up program, explained in Section 2, is used for women’s activities. From these results, we can work out the following points:

Women have a dual motive to participate in the program. The first includes problem-solving in the individual activity, and the second is that they were interested in the contents of the program such as personal consulting, study tour, and long-term programs. In particular, the local extension center has held several short-term programs on different contents. However, some rural women entrepreneurs are interested in attending long-term programs to get a chance of creating a new women’s entrepreneurial network.

From their answers, we gauged that interviewees learned the following points from the program. Through the Saitama Career-up program, they learned about

management policy as the program helped them build their business model and then helped make the management policy of their activity. In this way, women could grasp the business condition of their activity; therefore, this helped affirm their actions up until now and boosted their confidence in their activity management.

By participating in the program, they strengthened their information gathering. The program included a lecture on how to utilize SNS for their activity. Afterward, they utilized that knowledge to find a new market to sell their products and acquire a new customer base. Furthermore, they built a new type of group (web-based group) activity with participants of the program. The web-based group activity will be explained in detail in the next subsection.

In this way, the program has not only been able to fulfill the participation objectives such as solving individual

Table 7
Effects of Saitama Career-up Program

Questions	Answers	Explanation
Motivation for Participation	Problem Solving	Solving their activity’s problems
	Contents of Program	Individual Consultation
		Participating in study tours
Acquired Contents	Formulating Management Policy	Making a new management policy
	Reviewing Activity	Become confident about their business
	Forming RWEA Network	Meet other assertive rural women entrepreneurs
	Information Gain	Extension of market Information diffusion by SNS
Challenges after Participation	Technique and Information Gain	Attending other seminars that suit their individual problems
		Learning from predecessors working in the same business
	Networking Events	Interaction with other rural women entrepreneurs

problems but has also had positive effects such as confidence creation and formation of a new network of RWEAs.

Detail of Web-Based Group Activities

Web-based group activities were established by rural women who participated in the Career-up program. The web-based group differs from traditional groups in several ways.

In many traditional group activities, rural women cooperated by producing and selling their products. On the other hand, in web-based group activities, individual rural women entrepreneurs aim to strengthen PR and labor productivity by only cooperating with the PR and sales department.

A web-based group activity has the following characteristics: First, there are no rules or restrictions. Members of a traditional group activity hold regular meetings on food processing and decision-making. The web-based group members do not need to attend meetings. They share information on SNS instead of hosting regular meetings.

For these reasons, this group activity is considered web-based and is referred to as a web-based group in order to differentiate it from the rural women's traditional group.

Interviews with participants from the web-based group activity revealed that they felt positive about areas such as branding, personal problem-solving, expansion of sales channels, and PR promotion. Participants also indicated that they planned to be developed collaborative products in order to share each member's customers. In addition, some respondents answered that

group activities could use collective abilities to develop individual activities further. However, because web-based groups have only recently been established, a detailed investigation has not yet been undertaken. For that reason, further inquiry into the web-based group is necessary.

DISCUSSION

As it is described in Section 3.1, all the interviewees use their pre-farming careers in their individual activity. We concluded that pre-farming careers relevant to agriculture are easy to use in planning, product development, and food processing in their activity categories. On the other hand, public relations, negotiation, and selling do not depend on their activity contents. These categories are involved in all individual activities. Thus, the non-agricultural career is easy to use in these non-dependents categories. In previous research, rural women's pre-farming careers were pointed out to be utilized in financial management and selling (Katakura, 2007). However, we show that any kind of women's pre-farming careers could use in public relations, negotiation, and selling of RWEAs too.

In addition, many respondents started individual activities on their own free will. Their goals have changed from the economic independence set by MAFF to earning extra income from their family farm management. Being able to start individual activities on their own signifies that their ideas and abilities are accepted in family farm management. Likewise, it can be said that working for their family farm management

increases their level of participation. Additionally, women's pre-farming careers provide not only non-agricultural skills but also savings. The number of women with savings is increasing, thanks to salaries from their pre-farming careers. Earlier, funding for rural women, such as securing initial investment expenses, was difficult without the family's acceptance. Therefore, it was difficult for them to start their activity or to make decisions in their family farm management. This investigation reveals that rural women are currently able to establish their own activities by using their savings. Even if their activities are a part of family agricultural management, women who pay the initial investment take command of their activity's management. Hence, it can be said that the abilities and savings of rural women are helping foster rural women's empowerment. However, only their savings are not enough to cover the additional development of their activity.

By studying the Career-up program, women who participated in the program are able to address various issues such as gaining affirmation of their entrepreneurial activities, solving problems through personal consulting, and expanding their network. Although each rural woman entrepreneur faces different issues, the support they require also differs. It is, thus, difficult to make recommendations for supporting the diverse needs of the group members. One potential solution that each participant attends to most pertinent seminars individually to information gathering.

For the above reasons, the research is focused on web-based group activities that were established by rural women who participated in the Career-up program. It is believed they could improve their entrepreneurial activities through the web-based group activity. The women realize that the effects of web-based group activities, such as public relations, are being strengthened more than individual activities. Moreover, women entrepreneurs shared their customers with other members of the web-based group, such as products developed in collaboration for the expansion of sales channels. As their group activity inferred, these improved their individual activities. Additionally, it can be said that group activities have further positive effects such as the reduction in sales cost, improvement of the external image, acquisition of consulting partners, and it would be easier to receive support from the local extension center than individual activity. We think that the web-based group activity would not only solve the problems of individual activity, by utilizing members with various pre-farming careers but would also lead to women's empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to find out the effects of women's pre-farming careers in the development of individual activities and women's empowerment. We interviewed seven entrepreneurial rural women who participated in the Career-up program. From their response, we narrowed in on two points: the effect of their pre-farming

careers on their individual activity, and the development of their activity through the Saitama Career-up program. Based on these points, we further analyzed and discussed their responses.

It is clarified that rural women utilize their pre-farming careers in all aspects of their activity (e.g., management, food processing, selling, and PR). They developed their individual activity using their non-agricultural experience and knowledge. Through the interview, we discovered two points about empowerment. First, they regarded their individual activities as benefitting the whole family agricultural management. Therefore, it can be said that women are beginning to participate in management. Secondly, they had acquired the authority of decision-making in their activity. This is because they spent their own savings for the initial investment in their activity. The savings have been earned through their pre-farming careers, which is before they entered the family agricultural management. However, if there is a shortage of funds needed to expand rural women's individual activity, we need to find a way to solve the problem in the future.-

Rural women have developed entrepreneurial activities that utilize their pre-farming career skills. On the other hand, the diversity of pre-farming careers has made providing support for their entrepreneurial activities difficult. Women are trying to solve the above problems using the web-based group. They overcome their lack of abilities by collaborating with

members who have those required skills, gained from their various pre-farming careers. Furthermore, through the interview, we were able to assume that web-based groups are more likely to benefit than individual activity, such as the promotion of public relations.

The findings of this research indicate that the pre-farming careers of rural women not only lead to the development of individual activities but also promote the empowerment of rural women. Moreover, it is presumed that the web-based group activity much improves their individual activity. The web-based group may lead to opening a new path to rural women's empowerment.

This research has its limitations because it is focused on the small and medium scale of individual RWEAs. Therefore, our results cannot be directly applied to large-scale activities. In addition, we revealed the pre-farming careers' effect only qualitatively by semi-structured interviews. Further quantitative studies need to be conducted to show what kind of pre-farming careers have how much effect on each step of RWEA.

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