



Why Do Women Leave Rural Areas?: Testing the Fundamental Understanding of Local Government Leaders



People leave rural areas to go to college or find jobs in big cities. Many of them do not return to their hometowns. The declining birthrate in rural areas is becoming increasingly unstoppable. Koyasu Miwa says, “In a community where only homogeneous values are accepted, people with different, diverse values did not resist, but simply left the community in silence. It is important for the local people themselves to recognize and accept this, and through dialogue to think about what to do with the town in the future.”

Photo: Ryuji / PIXTA

Koyasu Miwa, Founder and CEO, Will Lab Inc.

The editorial staff of *Chuokoron* interviewed Koyasu Miwa, who travels around Japan to help eliminate the gender gap in rural workplaces and is familiar with the realities of local governments and businesses, about the reasons women leave rural areas and the conditions needed to create communities where women want to stay.

Women in rural areas who want to work but cannot

The so-called list of “municipalities at risk of disappearing” released by the Population Strategy Council (Chairman Mimura Akio, Vice-Chairman Masuda Hiroya) in April 2024 is commendable because it focuses on the emigration of young women as a cause of population decline, and I often quote it when I give lectures in rural areas.

However, let me start by saying that the company I represent, Will Lab Inc., does not conduct business with the goal of preventing population decline. Will Lab's goal is to create a society where individuals can challenge themselves to become who they want to be. The barrier to that is the gender gap. Recognizing that this is a pressing issue, Will Lab has been consulting with local governments.

The reason I mention the list of “municipalities at risk of disappearing” is because the reality is that it is difficult to get local governments interested in this issue by simply saying that it is about eliminating the gender gap. However, I have come to realize that efforts to eliminate the gender gap and maximize individual potential could ultimately contribute to the fight against depopulation, allowing us to share a common narrative.

Just about 10 years ago, when the so-called “[Masuda Report](#)” was released, I was working as an executive officer in charge of management at Recruit Jobs Inc. on how to address the anticipated challenges of population decline and labor shortages. What shocked me in that report was the data that at that time there were more than four million people who wanted to work but could not, and three-quarters of them were women. And many of these women were unable to work because they had to give birth and raise children. As the labor shortage became more severe throughout the country, there were people who wanted to work, but there was a group whose abilities as laborers were not being maximized — I felt that this was a major social problem, so I started a project to create a society where people could work while raising children.

As the project progressed, I began to receive requests from local governments for consultations and lectures. The first place to contact me was Kamaishi City, Iwate Prefecture, which was hit by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 and has since seen a significant decline in population and a serious labor shortage.

Even in rural areas, senior women are still a promising potential source of labor. So I decided to reach out to women who had difficulty finding work because of child-rearing and other reasons, and I proposed this to local officials, but at first I was told, “There aren't many women who want to work.” However, when an actual survey was conducted, the majority of women responded that they “want to work.” On the other hand, direct interviews with respondents revealed that some were unable to work because their husbands did not want them to work beyond the scope of the dependent-care tax credit, or because there were no jobs with conditions that would allow women to work while balancing housework and childcare. So, in cooperation with the city government, I decided to approach businesses to create jobs that would allow women to work flexible hours and short hours, and matched them with jobs. This was the first time I worked on women's issues in rural areas.

It is often said that “there are no jobs in rural areas, so people leave,” but this is not true. In rural areas facing labor shortages, there is a demand for jobs and people who want to work. However, there are some groups who are unable to work because of mismatches or other barriers. Women are a prime example. Wanting to solve this situation, I started working on eliminating the gender gap in rural areas.

Aiming to become a town people want to return to

As I have learned from working with many local governments, I believe there are three main reasons why women leave rural areas.

The first reason is continuing education. Many young people move to urban areas to continue their education. This is inevitable. In rural areas where there are few higher education institutions, it is natural

for young people, both men and women, to move to cities where there are schools they want to attend. However, policies that prevent young people from going outside their region to continue their education should never be implemented. No matter where they are born, they should have the right to learn what they want to learn and to challenge what they want to challenge. Rather, I want to focus on whether young people will return after graduation. The problem is that even if young people go out once, if they want to live in their hometown again, there are few places where they really want to work, which is the second reason.

For example, Toyooka City, Hyogo Prefecture, where I am involved, calculates the youth recovery rate, which is the rate at which the population that moved out in their teens has recovered in their 20s. While the rate for men was 52.2 percent, only 26.7 percent of women had recovered, meaning that only about half had recovered (2015 national census). Why is there such a big gender gap? Nakagai Muneharu, the mayor at the time, said, “It’s because it’s a male-dominated society.” Parents only tell their sons to “come back,” and businesses have only offered women supportive roles. Women don’t want to return to such communities.

Based on the hypothesis that “one of the reasons why young women do not return to their hometowns is the work environment,” a project was launched in 2018 to eliminate the gender gap in the workplace. Six years have passed since then. Many companies in Toyooka City have worked together to create workplaces that are easy and rewarding for women to work in, and as a result, women are actually starting to move in.

At Nakata Kogei Co., Ltd., for example, a manufacturer of wooden hangers, the president, who is in his 40s, is taking the initiative to take parental leave and is working to eliminate the gender gap. When they started to develop overseas sales channels, they were able to hire an out-of-town college graduate who speaks fluent English. If the company had remained a long-established small and medium-sized enterprise, skilled women from outside the city would not have moved there. But by adopting a vision of going from the local area to the world, change has come. If the number of such businesses increases, more women will want to live and work here, and the children born here will likely also think, “I want to come back to work here (even if I left the area once to go to school, etc.).”

Awareness of gender roles that hinders women’s participation in the community

However, this approach to workplace reform is not effective in all regions. For example, Nanto City, Toyama Prefecture, considered a similar approach but struggled with it. In a city like Toyooka City, which has diverse industries such as bag manufacturing and tourism, changes in business practice have a major impact on the city. But in Nanto City, the main industries are forestry and construction. In industries where there are few women to begin with, it is difficult to immediately utilize female labor, and it takes time to bring about change. Of course, I will work to reform the workplace in these areas, but I also felt that a different approach was needed.

The hypothesis that emerged from repeated interviews was the deep-rooted gender role consciousness based on patriarchy. I believe this is the third major reason why women leave rural areas.

In areas where patriarchy is unconsciously inherited, it is difficult for women to participate in local activities, and their skills, knowledge, and ideas are not easily reflected in the communities. In one area, I was surprised to hear that “the president of a residents’ association rotates among the *koshu* (heads of

households), and the next 10 years have already been decided.” The *koshu* under the old Civil Code (1898–1947) is still in use.

In areas where the social norm that women should silently respect men is deeply rooted, there must be many women who cannot speak up even if they have different thoughts and decide to leave the area. In fact, this is not limited to women. For example, in communities where older men make the decisions, young men have no voice and diverse opinions, regardless of gender, are not used in community development.

If women and young people (even if they return to the community) cannot participate in community building, it will not be a community they will want to return to. It is necessary to create a mechanism for women and youth to participate in community development.

Does top management understand the nature of gender issues?

If there is one thing that bothers me about the list of “municipalities at risk of disappearing,” it is that it does not adequately explain why women are leaving local communities. When some heads see the list, they will inevitably think, “We must bring women back and have children,” and rush to support “marriage hunting” and “child rearing.” I thought there was a risk that the wrong women’s policy would be implemented in local governments. “You’re a woman, so that’s enough, right?” “Get married quickly,” “Why haven’t you had children yet?”... Women will not return to areas where such words are heard. Local governments tend to look for policies that have visible results. But if local governments really want to stop women from leaving, the first and foremost requirement is the presence of a leader who deeply understands the problem and is committed to eliminating the gender gap. Whether it is a local government or a company, in order to implement reform, leaders must understand the nature of the problem. It depends on whether there is awareness and reflection that women are leaving the area because they are not getting equal opportunities just because they are women.

In the gender gap elimination projects I am involved in with local governments, I tell people that “the goal is not how much the population increases or how many women return.”

The KPI (Key Performance Indicator) set in Toyooka City’s work innovation strategy is to “create 50 local companies in 10 years where more than two-thirds of female employees say it is an easy place to work and that their work is rewarding.” If there were 50 such companies in a city with a population of less than 80,000, the entire city would have a reputation for being a good place to work and for providing job satisfaction for women.

In FY2024, a team of young managers in their 20s to 40s, as well as executives and employees of the city’s business establishments, has begun discussions on how to increase the number of companies (where more than two-thirds of female employees find it easy and rewarding to work) to 50. I feel that they are responding well to the fact that they are putting the community development that the younger generation wants as their own at the center of the project, so that it can be directly reflected in the policies, and that the leaders of each area are taking the initiative to put it into practice. Fifteen companies have already achieved their goal. The challenge now is how to increase the number to our target of 50 companies in the next four years.

In cities with an industrial cluster like Toyooka, working with private companies has been effective, but in cities with strong local influence, a different approach is being taken.

In Nanto City, a Citizens' Council to Eliminate the Gender Gap has been established and discussions have begun, with the council bringing together the secretary general of the Chamber of Commerce, the president of the PTA, the president of the Nanto City Regional Development Council Association, a female department manager at a construction company, and citizens in their 20s to 70s who have been publicly recruited, half male and half female.

It is important to understand who the key people are in the city and what the decision-making mechanism is. There are some areas where there are several key people and it is difficult to understand. Everyone knows the relationship between people in such cities, but it is not verbalized. In such areas, I conduct research before considering the framework of the team, and this often takes up a lot of time.

I have just discussed the case of basic municipalities, but a little more ingenuity is required when working with prefectures to move their respective municipalities. There are differences in leaders' understanding of fertility decline and gender issues related to population decline, and it is difficult to get all municipalities in the prefecture to work with the same enthusiasm at the same time. I think it is best for the prefectural government to take the lead in creating a model with a few influential cities first. When key cities within the prefecture change, the entire prefecture should move toward change.

To truly change the region, it is also important to have local government officials who can make adjustments across departmental boundaries within the municipality and work with key people in the city. Otherwise, the project will end up being hampered by the vertical division of local government and will have little impact. It cannot be changed by the private sector or government agencies alone. It is difficult without someone who can connect the various stakeholders in the community. But as long as you can connect those people, you can do great work that will impact the future of the community. I think local government officials have a very important role to play.

Thus, the three factors mentioned above are essential for the success of the gender gap project. In other words, the understanding of local government leaders, the enthusiasm and negotiating skills of officials, and the cooperation of key local people.

An opportunity for local residents to become aware

I am in a common-law marriage and have no children. When I talked about this at a local lecture, a local politician said to me, "It may be wise (to choose a common-law marriage), but are you happy?" and a local influential person said to me, "I don't know what happiness is anymore." When I told this story to people around me, some people said, "Why didn't you say something back?" but I think it was good that their true feelings were revealed.

Until now, there hasn't been an atmosphere in this town where women can confidently say, "I'm married, but it's a common-law marriage," or "I don't have children," and men probably assumed, "Women get married when they reach a certain age, give birth to children, raise them, and protect (inherit) the home. Men provide for their families. Reproducing this cycle is what happiness is all about." That's why I think they were surprised when they met someone like me for the first time. I think they were honest when they said that they "no longer understand what happiness is."

This is the first step to transformation. Knowing that there is more than one form of happiness is the first step toward acceptance. There is no need to force an argument here. In a community where only homogeneous values are accepted, people with different, diverse values did not resist, but simply left the community in silence. It is important for the local people themselves to recognize and accept this, and

through dialogue to think about what to do with the town in the future.

Regardless of gender, maximizing a person's skills and motivation leads to maximizing the human capital of cities and companies. The reality, however, is that half of this human capital is not utilized because of gender role consciousness. Those who believe that gender role consciousness is a value that should continue forever, from ancient times to the future, and that it should be preserved as a tradition, will feel that their ideas are being rejected and will not listen to other opinions for fear that their values will be destroyed.

That may have been fine in the past. But in the future, we need to create new values for each region through dialogue. Instead of telling people from above that “gender perspective is important,” local people themselves should express their frustrations, such as “She was excellent, but she quit (because of housework, marriage, and childbirth),” or “He wanted to move to Tokyo (to continue his studies or get a job), but he gave up because he is the eldest son,” and put into words whether this situation should be passed on to the next generation, and what should be done if it is not passed on. I think the key to making efforts [on gender issues] sustainable is to weave in the local people's own thoughts and words, rather than borrowing ideas and words.

Women should also stand in solidarity and speak out

Will Lab also holds regular women-only reading groups. The other day, a local government official came all the way to join us. The book she chose was *Zero kara Hajimeru Joseigaku — Jenda de Yomu Raifuwaku-ron* (Women's studies starting from zero — Life Work Theory Read by Gender) (Sekaishissha) by Tendo Mutsuko. She showed us the book covered with sticky notes and said, “I realized how trapped I was in gender. I had believed that because I was a woman and a wife, I had to do 100% of the housework, but that may have been the cause of the gender gap in my hometown.”

I said that understanding between the head, officials, and key people in the city is important to eliminate the gender gap, but in addition to that, it is also important for the women involved to change their attitudes. In Japan, it has been difficult for women to speak out about the injustice of their situation. Although there were women's movements, they did not develop into national movements. One reason may be that the culture does not think it is good for women to speak out. Another reason is that women themselves have been led to believe that they are privileged. In the days when the majority of households had full-time housewives, Japanese women were in a sense economically protected by the Category 3 insurance system¹. But at the same time, it can be said that they were deprived of the right to work and the right to be economically independent. I would like women to think about how they will live and work in the future in accordance with the changes in society.

In May 2024, I visited Iceland, the country ranked first in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report (Gender Gap Index), and was surprised by three things. The first was that Iceland has a strict legal system to promote gender equality, including the imposition of fines for pay disparities between men and women. The second was that unlike Japan, where older men often make decisions, Iceland is a

¹ The “Category 3 insured person system” is part of Japan's public pension system, aimed at supporting dependents (mainly homemakers or spouses working part-time) of company employees or public servants enrolled in Employees' Pension Insurance or Mutual Aid Association Pensions. Under this system, eligible dependents can acquire the right to receive a basic pension without personally paying insurance premiums. To qualify, a person must generally be “between 20 and 60 years of age and earn less than 1.3 million yen annually.” <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/shingi/0112/s1214-3g.html> [in Japanese]

society where everything is decided democratically down to the last detail. And the third was that Iceland has a history of women uniting and speaking out.

In 1975, a large demonstration against the wage gap between men and women, “Women’s Day Off (Kvennafrídagurinn),” took place in Iceland. Ninety percent of the women abandoned childcare and work and gathered in the square. Apparently, traffic was paralyzed and banks were closed because men had to take care of children. The demonstration is still held every few years, and I heard that 100,000 women, including the former prime minister, gathered last year. Behind Iceland’s number one ranking is the solidarity of diverse women from all walks of life who have demanded gender equality. In the future, I would like to work on creating a system that encourages the action of “uniting and speaking out,” which is lacking among Japanese women.

Moderated by Takamatsu Yuka

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