

Young Energy Is Jazzing up Farming

I am a farmer, working on a farm that has been in our family for seven generations. I am twenty-two and love *gyaru*-style makeup and dressing up, so I found out quickly that there aren't many other young women in agriculture I could freely talk to. But this is the age of the Internet, so I created an online community called "No-ing Musume" 農-ing 娘, which means "Farming Girls," to find other young women who work in agriculture in other parts of Japan and get to know them.



You can listen to Mikako's voice.

Mikako, 22, Akita prefecture

As a child, I often helped out my parents on the farm, but I had no intention of following in their footsteps. I thought I wanted to be an office worker, so after graduating from high school I went to vocational school to learn clerical skills. There I realized that I didn't really want a job where I would have to sit in an office all day long. I got into a fight with my parents, who didn't want me to quit school, and I rebelled, leaving home for a while. Eventually, my parents relented and I dropped out of that school. Even after I went back home, though, I couldn't figure out what to do with myself. I spent many idle, aimless days wondering what path I wanted to pursue.

Then my parents said, "Why don't you help out on the farm?" As a child, I was often given painstaking and rather tedious jobs to do, like sorting seeds, so I thought that farming was boring. Well, I'm a big girl now, so they let me drive a tractor and operate new machinery that we didn't have in the past. The tasks they gave me made me feel in command and challenged, and my previous impression of farming as dull and monotonous just vanished. Not only was it exciting to operate the machinery—I also discovered the joy of harvesting crops that I had planted myself. Gradually, I found myself feeling really committed to farming. And now, I grow crops like rice, long onions (*negi* ねぎ), round onions, corn, eggplant, tomatoes, green soybeans (*edamame* 枝豆), potatoes, pumpkin, bok choy (*chingensai* チンゲン菜), asparagus, cabbage, and Chinese cabbage (*hakusai* 白菜).



Mikako mastered the use of all sorts of farm machinery.

Encounters through Farming

Once I began working as a farmer, I started to meet all kinds of interesting people, and we share our daily news through our blogs and Twitter accounts. The young female farmers all over the country whom I met online are an extremely impor-

tant source of moral support. In the No-ing Musume community that we created together, we exchange information about farming or ask each other for advice through our blogs and e-mail; we also meet in person to get to know each other better. Currently, we have about twenty members. Since the majority of farmers tend to be older men, I used to feel lonely because I didn't know young women I could talk with freely or discuss problems I had on the farm. Today, I'm very happy because, thanks to the Internet, I can consult other young women of similar outlook and circumstances. Many non-farmers have also left supportive messages on my blog or visited me in person, which is very encouraging. These relationships and connections I have established with people are what I love the most about farming.

Mixed Feelings about "Trendy" Farming

The media has lately been portraying the "cool" or heroic aspects of farming, and emphasizing the way working with the land can be psychologically "healing." Media attention has also tended to focus on groups of fashionably dressed, young *gyaru* ギャル girls from Tokyo who go out to the country on weekends to "experience" farming. It is a good thing if people are getting a more positive impression of agriculture and becoming more interested in farming.

Still, some people from the city go into farming thinking it is going to solve their psychological problems, be relaxing, easy, and a release from the pressures they are under. Many seem to think that relationships between people are less complicated in farming and that one can make a living simply by growing crops.

All that is far from the reality. In summer, we work under the



Cleaning long onions (*negi*). Being a farmer involves not just work in the fields, but many painstaking and important tasks in preparing produce for market.

blazing hot sun, and the hard physical labor we perform is far from “relaxing.” There are no weekends or long holidays, and no fixed working hours. We farmers have to work with lots of other people, too, and relationships can be quite complicated. Farming is not simply a matter of growing crops; we have to think of profitable ways to sell them as well. Far from being free of anxiety, the work is often nerve-wracking. On our farm, we once hosted trainees who, influenced by the trendy image of farming, came thinking they wanted to become farmers. When they came face to face with the gap between their idealized notion of farming and the reality, all they could do was complain that the work was too hard and that they were unable to endure the lack of holidays. Eventually they gave up.

Making a living from farming is not easy or uncomplicated. I think it's great that the media has improved the image of agriculture and that more people are becoming interested in it. However, as one who faces the serious problems and hardships of farming every day, I can't help but feel a bit irritated by people who go into farming just because they think it will be easy.

Living with Uncertainty

Of course, even I was a bit naïve at first and often wanted to throw in the towel. When I first began farming, people left spiteful messages on my blog, disparaging the idea of a woman driving a tractor. There was even some harassment—people threw empty cans onto our property and pulled up seedlings we had planted. I've been farming for four years now, and at first there were many incidents that discouraged and frustrated me. I was able to continue because I felt strongly that if I quit, I would just make myself into a loser. I was also able to go on thanks to the many fine people I have met since starting this job.

To be sure, recently my confidence is sometimes shaken because of the numerous uncertainties involved in making a living as a farmer in Japan today. For instance, due to the lack of help from young people, elderly farmers are forced to shoulder demanding physical labor themselves. As older farmers retire, there will be even fewer people to work on the farms. Cheap, imported vegetables and crops from overseas keep the value of domestic crops low. If our crops are damaged by bad weather or natural disasters, we have no income. Many farmers today lead unstable lives on very meager profits. I myself worry every day whether I will be able to make a living as a farmer in the decades ahead.

Despite the uncertainty, I plan to continue farming as long as I can. Since I started farming and have met people of all ages, I've begun to learn more about Japanese history, too. I have gotten interested in some of the sayings of famous people of long ago and found their words and outlook on life a big inspiration. I would like to learn more about our history and think about

what it is that young Japanese people like myself are lacking. I'm determined to go on living with this uncertainty and continue farming as best I can.

Mikako's blog:

<http://ameblo.jp/kodamanojo>

My favorites



好きなこと What I'm into now

化粧すること。特にギャルメイクが好きです。

Wearing makeup—I especially love *gyaru*-style makeup.

好きな野菜 Favorite vegetable

玉ねぎ。食感が好きです。

Round onions. I love their crisp, succulent texture.

将来の夢 My dream

農業を通じて友だちをたくさんつくることです。

To make many more friends through farming.

農業をやっている楽しいと思うこと What I love about farming

色々な人に出会えること。

Meeting different types of people through farming.

大好きな、歴史上の偉人のことば My favorite quote

世の人は 何を何とも言わば言え 我が成す事は 我のみぞ知る
 “No matter how people may criticize me, I am the only one who knows what I want to accomplish.” (Yo no hito wa / ware o nan tomo iwaba ie / wa ga nasu koto wa / ware nomi zo shiru)



Harvesting crops I planted myself makes me especially happy.



Note: This article is based on an interview held in December 2010.