

**Voluntary Report** – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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**Report Name:** Number of Women Farmers in Japan Continues to Decline

**Country:** Japan

**Post:** Tokyo

**Report Category:** Agricultural Situation, Agriculture in the Economy

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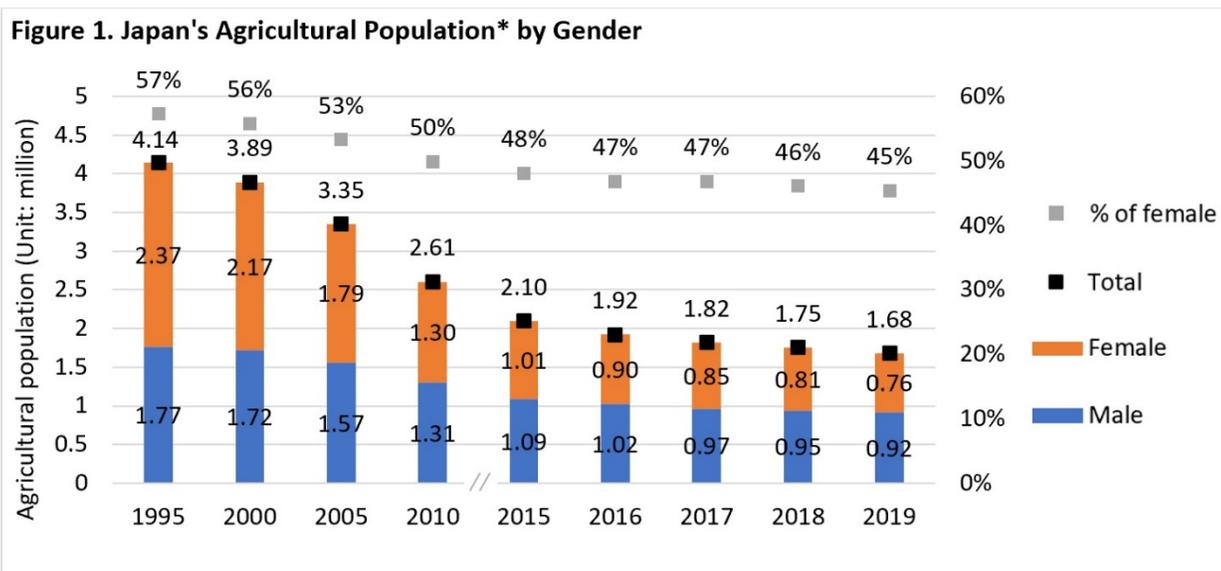
**Approved By:** Mariya Rakhovskaya

**Report Highlights:**

Recent demographic data indicates a reversal in the traditional gender ratio of Japanese farmers. Historically, women farmers outnumbered male farmers in Japan. Over the past ten years, however, the number of male farmers has surpassed that of women farmers. As Japan's agriculture struggles with labor shortages due to demographic trends (JA2020-0081), government policies have increasingly focused on promoting female participation in the sector. While there has been some progress, continued migration to urban areas and rising demand for workers in other sectors such as healthcare, suggest the trend may continue.

## Recent Demographic Changes in the Agricultural Sector

Small family farms with annual sales below 3 million Japanese yen (approximately \$28,000) represent over three quarters of Japan’s agricultural management entities ([2015 Agricultural Census](#)). Until 2010, women farmers represented over half of Japan’s agricultural population (Figure 1), excluding hired workers, and played a major role in these small family farms (for an earlier overview of Women in Agriculture in Japan, see [JA5006](#)). By 2019, the proportion of women farmers fell to 45 percent ([Survey on Movement of Agricultural Structure](#)). Meanwhile, the gender ratio of Japan’s total adult population (20 years and older) has remained at 48 percent male and 52 percent female for over 20 years ([2015 Population Census](#)).

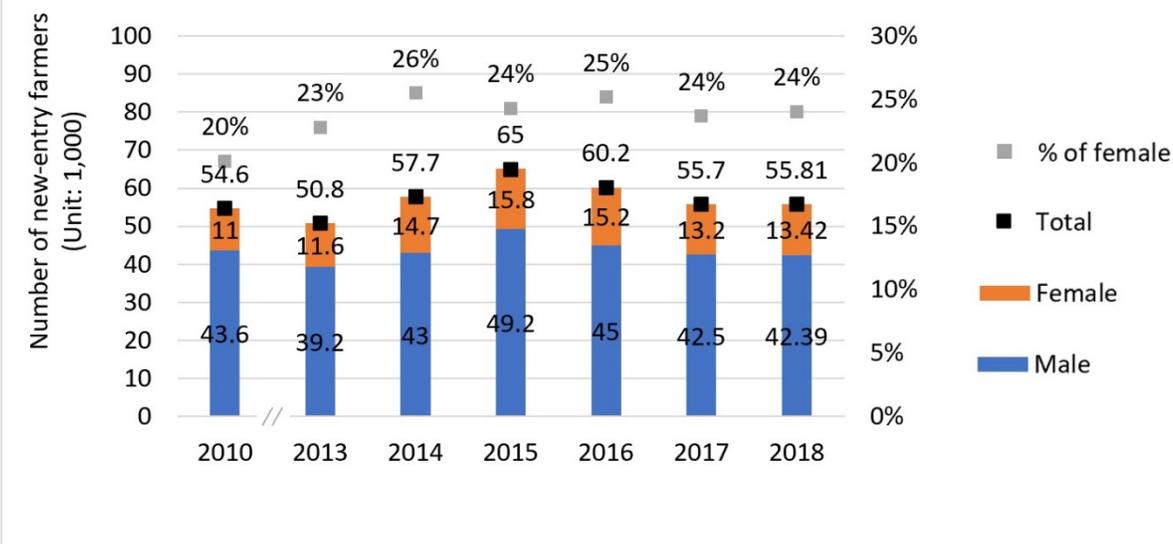


Note: \*Agricultural population refers to farm household members engaged in farming or in work other than farming, but spending more days engaged in farming than the year prior. This number does not include permanently or temporary hired farm workers. In 2019, there were 236,100 hired workers with contract durations of seven months or more.

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)

Moreover, as fewer women than men enter farming, the average age of female farmers has risen faster than that of male farmers. By 2019, the average age of female farmers was 67.6 with farmers under 40 years old comprising only 2.3 percent, while the average age of male farmers was 66.5 with farmers under 40 comprising 4.7 percent. Although slightly more women have entered the agricultural population since 2010, over the past five years, the proportion of new-entry women farmers has hovered at 24-25 percent (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Gender Ratio of New-entry Farmers\* in Japan**

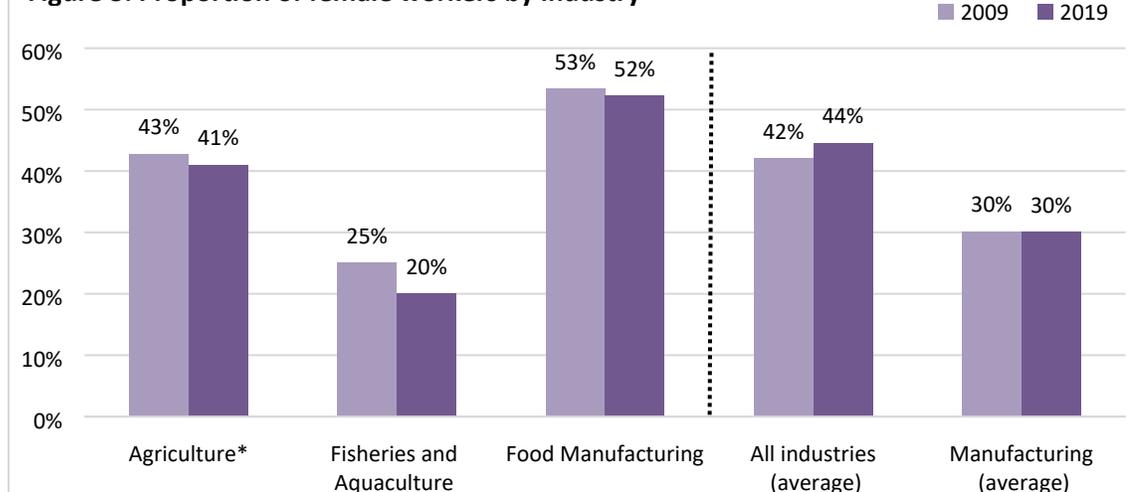


Note: \*New-entry farmers include new self-employed farmers, new employed farmers and new entries (managers who have started farming business by securing land and funds on their own).

Source: MAFF

Between 2009 and 2019, the average proportion of women across all industries in Japan increased slightly, while the proportion of women in food-related industries, such as agriculture, food manufacturing and fisheries showed a downward trend (Figure 3). By 2019, women comprised 41 percent of the agricultural workforce, including hired workers, below the overall workforce average of 44 percent.

**Figure 3: Proportion of female workers by industry**



Note: Agricultural population includes hired workers.

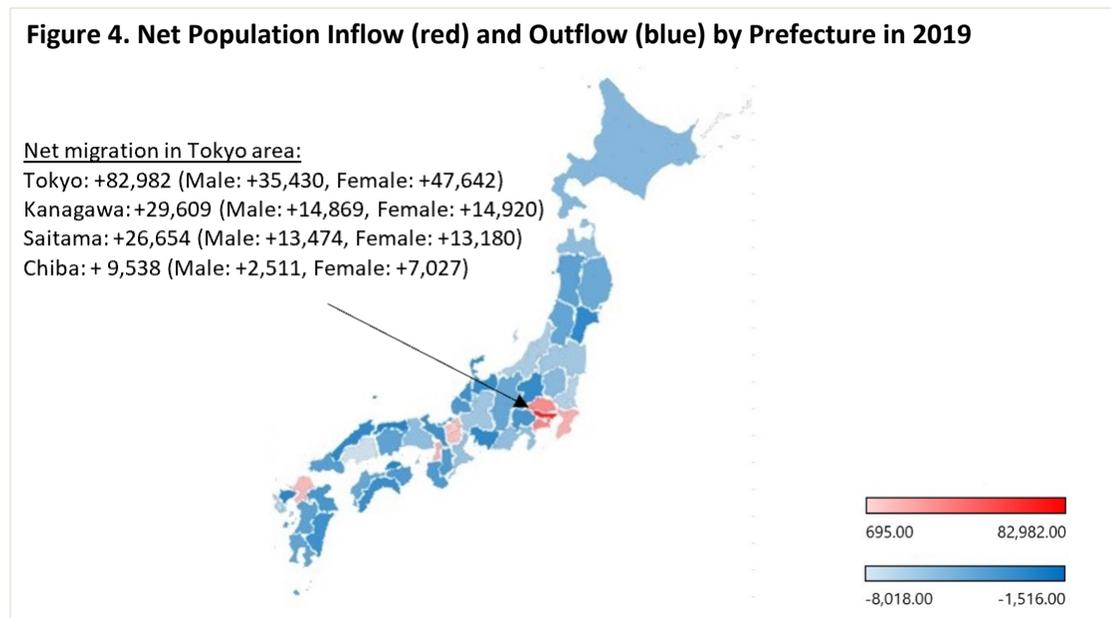
Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC)

## Concentration to Japan’s major cities and rising needs in alternative sectors

Two socio-economic drivers appear to underpin Japan’s recent decline in women’s participation in agriculture: continued population inflow to major urban centers from rural areas and rising labor demand in other industries, such as healthcare and nursing services.

Census data, published every 5 years, indicates a greater decline in the number of rural female residents compared to men. This trend is particularly noticeable among the younger generation aged 25-44 years. Less than 20 percent of Japan’s total female population now live in rural areas, and the figure drops to just over 15 percent for younger women.

The 2019 [MIC report on internal migration](#)<sup>1</sup> (available only in Japanese) showed that only eight out of Japan’s 47 prefectures experienced net population inflows, with the Tokyo area (i.e., Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama and Chiba prefectures) receiving the highest number of new residents (Figure 4). Most of these migrants were women. A [2019 Japan Times editorial](#) notes that this rural flight has accelerated in recent years, despite government’s 2015-2019 “regional revitalization programs” that aimed to stop the net population inflow to the Tokyo area by 2020.



Note: Red indicates that population change was positive while blue indicates negative.

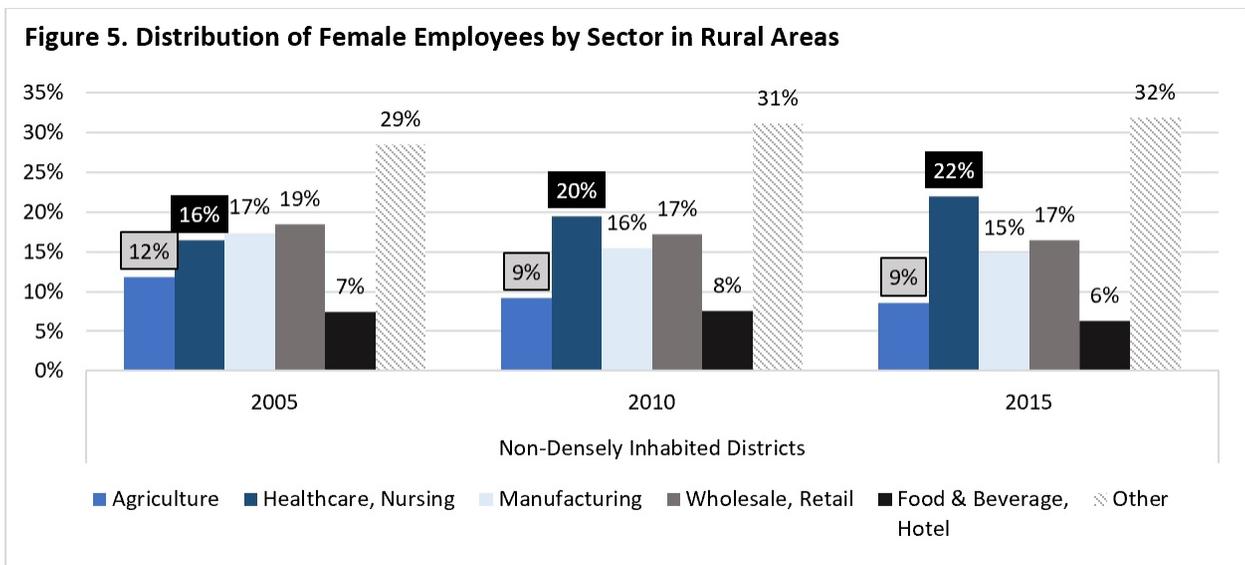
Source: MIC’s “[Annual report on internal migration in Japan derived from the basic resident registration 2019](#)”

Due to an aging population, Japan’s labor demands in healthcare and nursing fields have been on the rise, including in rural areas. In recent years, that increase in the number of female employees in

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<sup>1</sup> The report includes foreign residents who represent 2.1 percent of Japan’s population.

healthcare and other sectors in “non-densely inhabited districts” has paralleled a decline in women’s participation in agriculture (Figure 5). A [similar sectoral employment trend](#) for male workers suggests a continuing challenge in securing Japan’s future generation of farmers.



Notes:

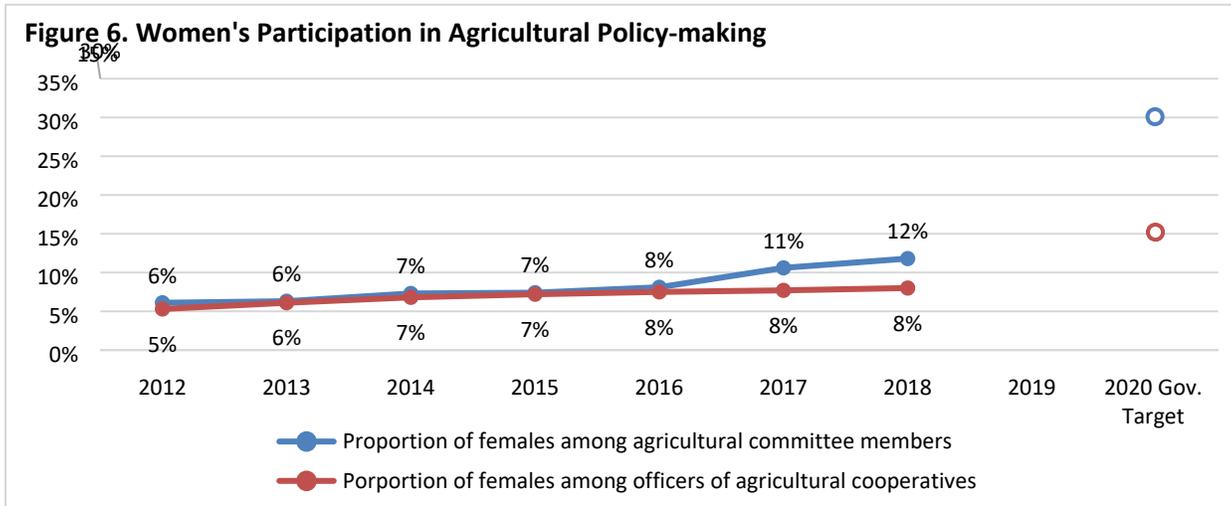
\*Densely Inhabited Districts refer to areas where basic district units, as defined by the national census, with population density of 4,000 or more per square kilometer are adjacent to each other, and the total population of these conjoined districts exceeds 4,999.

\*\* Due to rounding error, the total 2010 and 2015 female employee percentages exceed 100%.

Sources: MAFF, MIC

## Government’s Response

In recognition of the declining number of women in agriculture, the Government of Japan (GOJ) aimed to promote women’s participation in agricultural management and entrepreneurship through [the 2015 Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality](#) (for details on policies prior to 2015, see [JA5006](#)). The Plan set targets for the proportion of women in agricultural committees (30 percent) and among officers of agricultural cooperatives (15 percent) for 2020. In 2016, the revised Agricultural Commission Act and Agricultural Cooperatives Act specified that care shall be taken so that there was no significant bias in the age and gender composition of committee members and directors. Although 2019 and 2020 data on the relevant memberships is still unavailable, the latest available data suggests that these targets have not been met (Figure 6).



Source: MAFF, Japan Agricultural News

In its latest [white paper on food, agriculture and rural villages](#), MAFF identified “Women in Agriculture” as a focus. Specifically, the document calls for additional measures to support women farmers, such as attracting women to rural areas and farming, and reflecting women’s voices in regional agricultural planning through increased women’s leadership.

For example, MAFF’s “Women Farmers Project,” which began in 2013 (see [JA5006](#) for background), offers managerial and leadership training for women farmers through collaboration with educational institutions and private companies from various industries. The program also promotes networking among Japan’s women farmers. By December 2014, 222 female farmers and 19 companies took part in the program. By March 2020, the cumulative number of project participants grew to 808 female farmers and 33 companies. In 2016, the Women Farmers Project launched “Hagukumi,” a new team focused on increasing opportunities for female high school and university students to interact with female farmers and consider farming as a career option. To date, one high school and six universities took part in Hagukumi.

More broadly, in December 2019, GOJ announced its [second five-year comprehensive strategy](#) (available in Japanese only) for regional revitalization, which will run from Japanese fiscal year (JFY, April-March) 2020 to JFY 2024. The goal is to stem rural flight. To that end, the strategy focuses on increasing urban populations’ exposure to rural regions through promotion of tourism and secondary employment in the countryside. To date, despite media reports of a rising trend among younger Japanese to relocate to rural areas and to take on secondary employment in agriculture, the overall migration trend is firmly directed toward urban regions.

## Challenges Ahead

On March 31, 2020, GOJ approved the new [Basic Plan on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas](#), which sets the direction of the country's agricultural policy for the next 10 years. The Plan aims to increase Japan's food self-sufficiency rate (on a caloric basis) from the current 37 percent to 45 percent by 2030 and sets higher production targets for 2030 for all major products, with the exception of rice. The Plan also encourages the use of digital technologies and data-driven agricultural management to address the challenges of an aging and declining farmer population.

Consolidation and productivity of Japan's agricultural sector remain behind most of its Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) peers ([2016 OECD Cross-Country Comparison of Farm Size Distribution](#)). According to Japan's agricultural census, in 1995, agricultural entities with more than 10 hectares (ha) of farming land represented 26.5 percent of total cultivated land in Japan. By 2015, the proportion of these larger agricultural entities nearly doubled to 48 percent. In 2019, Japan's average farm size was 2.99 ha ([MAFF Survey on Movement of Agricultural Structure](#)). By comparison, the average farm size in the United States was 179.68 ha in 2018 ([2020 National Agricultural Statistics Service Farms and Land in Farms report](#)).

The decline in the number of younger women farmers will not be easily offset through current minimal reliance on non-traditional methods of agricultural production, such as foreign labor (currently at two percent of total agricultural population, see [JA2020-0081](#)), corporations (as opposed to family-owned farms) and outsourcing of food manufacturing overseas. According to the [2015 Agricultural Census](#), corporations or organized agricultural entities not under family management accounted for only 27.3 percent of agricultural product sales. Although MAFF 2020 Supplementary Budget for the COVID-19 Response encourages Japanese companies to switch from reliance on imported produce (such as vegetables) for processing to domestic produce ([JA2020-0085](#)), based on relative production costs, outsourcing of food manufacturing is expected to continue.

## Attachments:

No Attachments.