

From Yokohama to Paraguay: Weaving Dreams with the Rural Women in Paraguay

~The Challenge of Yoko Fujikake

Yoko Fujikake's passion for Paraguay runs very deep. A Ph.D., the faculty, and Dean of the Institute of Urban Innovation at Yokohama National University (YNU) is also a Cultural and Development Anthropologist, and an expert researcher on Paraguay.

Dr. Fujikake first set her foot in Paraguay in January 1994 as a member of JICA's Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers program. Her task was to aid the women and children in Coronel Oviedo, a city in east-central Paraguay, working with the Extension Service of the Ministry of Agriculture and Pasture. During her residency of two years and three months, she visited thirty-seven villages and taught local women about nutrition and processed food production.

It was the time when women could not leave their village easily - it was socially and culturally unfavorable, and geographically difficult. But they lacked the means to support themselves and their family. Some single mothers had up to ten children, and their need to generate income, not to mention the want to improve their quality of life, was extremely urgent.

In response, Dr. Fujikake established food processing factories and a children's daycare center, which enabled them to work while still living in their villages. The effort became fruitful – soon they were selling their products in local farmers' markets. They also began addressing their wants and needs to their partners and public officials, engaging in managing the daycare center. These developments not only led the local women to fend for themselves but also inspired the community, receiving support from men. Yet, the most remarkable consequence was that they have transformed their own core belief systems. One local woman proudly voiced her mind "I am no longer the person whom I was yesterday."

As part of her continuing support, Dr. Fujikake organized *the XJICA Grassroots Technical Cooperation Project at YNU: Improving the Lives of Rural Women in Paraguay ~Weaving Dreams from Yokohama* between September 2016 and December 2021. In collaboration with Asuncion National University and other institutions in Paraguay, she organized a series of workshops to educate the local women in La Colmena and Coronel Oviedo, the first Japanese immigration sector in Paraguay. The intensive training provided both knowledge and skills in production, marketing, and finance of

the food processing businesses. Once the workshop was completed in Paraguay, the selected trainees and instructors were invited to Japan for the additional experience.

Dr. Fujikake's research shows this project had an enormous impact on local communities - more than twice as many individuals than she had anticipated directly benefited from its outcome. Some women became leaders in local food businesses and began teaching Business Management at elementary schools. Others founded *La Colmena Entrepreneurial Women's Association* to systematically oversee their products. The accomplishment was also personal. One woman said, "In the past, we used to keep our heads down like turtles, but now we look at the world with our heads held high up, like giraffes."

Dr. Fujikake is also the chairperson of the *Mitai Mitakunyai Children's Fund* - Mitai means boys and Mitakunyai means girls in Guarani, the indigenous language of Paraguay. Since May 1995 it has founded two elementary and one nursery school in rural areas. It also assisted the residents of Bañado Sul, a slum in Asuncion, inviting Cateura Orchestra to Japan to perform in 2011. In 2016 the Fund initiated a program to improve the quality of life in Bañado Sul by collaborating with local youth. The women in Bañado Sul have been trained to acquire skills for finger-nail art, and in 2022 another program will launch for them to obtain hairstyling skills.

Likewise, Dr. Fujikake has been avidly supporting the fair trade of Nyandoti, the traditional lace embroidery recognized as Paraguay's intangible cultural heritage. A new undertaking for this local treasure will be developed to improve the quality of Nyandoti in collaboration with Mierena Iwatani, an expert in Nyandoti production.

In early 2022, Dr. Fujikake inaugurated the second phase of her continuing project, *Complex Rural Development Project in Paraguay* to assist the local Agritourism. The new enterprise takes advantage of the rich natural resources remaining in rural Paraguay. Tourists will visit to appreciate various local experiences, such as mandioca harvesting and milking in dairy farms.

What Dr. Fujikake has brought to rural Paraguay unveils the substantial positive changes in society, especially the improvement of gender equality. By describing Paraguay as her second home, she continues to endorse her enthusiasm to improve the lives of Paraguayans, especially of women for their empowerment in her projects.



Presentation at Yokohama National University in November 2019.

Paraguayan Ambassador Raul Florentin, PM Yoko Fujikake, women who traveled from Paraguay to participate in the training held in Japan, and faculty members of counterpart universities.



The Commencement at La Colmena Branch of Nihongakkou University, September 2017. Project participants who completed the course, and students from Yokohama National University.



Intensive lecture at La Colmena Branch of Nihon Gakko University in September 2017. PM Fujikake (center left), Professor Emeritus Shibukawa (center right), and rural women participating in the lecture.



Intensive Lecture in Coronel Oviedo in September 2019. Men actively participated in the project.