

Paraguay National Day Special

Programs help to empower rural women

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AMBASSADOR OF PARAGUAY



In celebration of Paraguay's 211th anniversary of independence, we wanted to share a bright symbol of the friendship that depicts the diplomatic relations between Paraguay and Japan, which date back more than 100 years. Paraguay promotes numerous initiatives for rural women to empower them, and the inspiring actions of Yoko Fujikake, dean of the College of Urban Sciences at Yokohama National University, deserve a special highlight in this effort.

She first set foot in Paraguay in January 1993 as a member of the Japan International Cooperation Agency's Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. Her task was to aid the rural women and children in Coronel Oviedo working with the Extension Service of the Paraguayan Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. During the two years and three months of her residency, she visited 37 villages and taught local women about nutrition and processed food production.

Fujikake established factories to produce processed food in two of the villages and a children's day care center in another. These facilities enabled women to work while still living in their villages. They soon began negotiating with their spouses and public officials. The outcome of their efforts was fruitful, successfully joining local farmers' markets to sell their products. By addressing their wants and needs to public officials, they also got involved in managing day care facilities. Such proactive communication initiated by the women inspired the public, including the men, adding support to meet the challenges the women faced.

This development led the local women to not only fend for themselves, but also transform their core belief systems. One woman proudly stated, "I am no longer the person whom I was yesterday." As part of her continuing support, Fujikake organized a JICA Technical Cooperation Project at Yokohama National University to improve the lives of rural women in Paraguay, from September 2016 to December 2021.

The outcome of this project showed evidence of a huge impact on local communities. Originally aimed at attracting 390 individuals, it grew much bigger, directly affecting 919 individuals by the end of the first project, 236% more than Fujikake's original goal. Some women became leaders in local food businesses and began teaching business management at elementary schools. Others founded La Colmena Entrepreneurial Women's Association, which systematically oversees its products. The positive outcome is not merely on the surface, but deeply personal. One participant 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." What Fujikake has brought to rural Paraguay unveils the substantial improvement in quality of life, especially with gender equality.

Back in May 1995, Fujikake established a children's foundation called Mita'i Mitakuna'i. *Mita'i* means boys and *mitakuna'i* means girls in Guarani, the indigenous language of Paraguay.

To date, the fund has founded three rural elementary schools, as well as a nursery school. It also assisted the residents of Banado Sur, a slum in Asuncion, inviting the Cateura Orchestra to Japan to perform concerts in 2013. In 2018, a program to improve the quality of people's lives in Banado Sur was developed with local youth. Since 2018, the women have been trained to obtain the skills for fingernail

art, and in 2022, the hair art project will be initiated for local residents to obtain hair-styling skills. Being actively involved in a variety of projects as chairperson of Mita'i Mitakuna'i Foundation, Fujikake also avidly supports the fair trade of *nanduti*, 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 *nanduti* in collaboration with Mie Elena Iwatani, an expert in *nanduti* production.

In early 2022, Fujikake inaugurated the second phase of her project in the hope of fostering the development of agritourism. This new enterprise takes advantage of the rich natural resources remaining in rural Paraguay so that tourists will come to appreciate various local experiences, such as cassava harvesting and milking in dairy farms.

While all contributions to Paraguay by the Japanese may be vast, by describing Paraguay as her second home, Fujikake continues to endorse her enthusiasm to improve the lives of Paraguayans, especially women, in her projects.

This content was compiled in collaboration with the embassy. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper.



Ambassador Raul Florentin and Yoko Fujikake (sixth and fifth from left) pose with trainees at Yokohama National University in November 2019. YNU/JICA




Yoko Fujikake of Yokohama National University points to a sign during an intensive lecture in Coronel Oviedo in September 2019. Far left: Rural women participate in a lecture at the La Colmena Branch of Nihon Gakko University in Paraguay in September 2017. YNU/JICA

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the Anniversary of
Their Independence

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