

Silk Farming and Female Labor

Silkworm raising and raw-silk reeling in Shirakawa-go was notably labor-intensive and relied particularly on a female workforce. The scarcity of arable land in the Sho river valley meant that the mulberries used as food for silkworms had to be grown on the mountainsides, often on multiple small plots far from each other. In addition to harvesting mulberry leaves, a large labor force was required for reeling, which is the process of unwinding raw silk thread from cocoons. This monotonous and tiring task, usually performed from July to September, every day from early morning to evening and sometimes past nightfall by the light of an oil lamp, was mainly done by women. In the Toyama household, reeling was initially a completely manual form of labor but was partially mechanized in the late 1800s. Reeling machines powered by a water wheel were placed in a shed next to the main house, which had space for eight women working side by side. The importance of women's labor in sericulture motivated the heads of families to keep their female children and grandchildren in the home to work, and led to a system of marriage in which husbands visited their wives in the latter's family home instead of living together in a separate house.