

## FEMALE PEASANTS AND THE ALTERNATIVE AGRI-FOOD MOVEMENT IN SOUTH KOREA: AGROECOLOGY AND THE KOREAN WOMEN PEASANT ASSOCIATION MOVEMENT

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the current state and socio-ecological implications of the alternative agri-food movement organized by the Korean Women Peasant Association (KWPA) in South Korea. In the process of rapid industrial development, South Korean farm sector has suffered from serious environmental problems, depopulation, and poverty. Food production itself has become mostly industrialized using abundant amount of chemical input. This, along with mass consumption system relying on large supermarkets, has led to an unsustainable food system. In this situation, there has been a rise of alternative agri-food movement by the KWPA. We have focused on the influence of agroecology in the KWPA's activities, which might bring about a more sustainable food system. Under the dominant paradigm of agro-industrialism, farm production inevitably depends on outside resources. This de-contextualizes and disconnects farming from local ecosystems and social relations. Agroecology has emerged in recent years as an alternative paradigm, which can reconnect farming, nature, and society. We have analyzed the KWPA's programs, such as the indigenous seed preservation movement (ISPM) and Sisters' Garden Plot (SGP). We have found that agroecology plays an important role in the KWPA's programs, which involve sharing indigenous farm knowledge; preserving and finding indigenous seeds; and providing seasonal, local, and organic food to the public. These activities have also led to the empowerment of female peasants. These as a whole could be important social resource for a transition to a more sustainable food system.

**Keywords:** Agroecology; Alternative agri-food movement; Community-supported agriculture; Female peasants; Indigenous seed preservation movement; Sisters' Garden Plot

### 1. Introduction

The modern food system heavily relies on industrial inputs, such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and fossil fuel. Industrial farming has become integral part of modern food production, and large agri-food companies play an important role in it (Pfeiffer, 2006; Carolan, 2011). The modern food system is environmentally and socially unsustainable and negatively affects rural communities. Under the dominant paradigm of agro-industrialism, farm production inevitably depends on non-local resources, so it is de-contextualized and disconnected from local ecosystems and social

relations. Furthermore, the modern food system is increasingly controlled by large seed companies, powerful processors, transnational traders, supermarket chains, and financial institutions, which leads some to label it as the corporate food regime (McMichael, 2014). Concern has increased about the potential and real risks of the existing food system. In response, there have been many efforts to seek an alternative food system (Blay-Palmer, 2010; Rossin, Stock, & Campbell, 2012). One of these important efforts has been agroecology. The agroecological paradigm emphasizes environmentally sustainable agriculture, ecological diversity, and the importance of peasants and small family farmers.

Recently, the alternative agri-food movement has taken agroecology seriously in realizing sustainability in farm and food systems. Most notably, the food sovereignty movement initially promoted by La Via Campesina is closely linked to agroecology. Food sovereignty is defined as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

This paper examines how agroecology has become an integral part of Korean female peasants' efforts to bring about food sovereignty. While female peasants had never established a favorable locus in the Korean farm sector, the neo-liberal shift since the 1980s has exacerbated their position. In this context, the Korean Women Peasant Association (KWPA), a national female peasants movement group, developed alternative activities to cope. The indigenous seed preservation movement (ISPM) and Sisters' Garden Plot (SGP) are the two notable examples of such efforts. These movements contain agroecological components which resist the dominant paradigm of agriculture and build sustainable farm environments. The KWPA plays a key role in building and sustaining movements which include sharing indigenous farm knowledge; preserving and finding indigenous seeds; and providing seasonal, local, and organic food to the public. Recently, there have been several researches on KWPA and its activities either focusing on eco-feminism or food sovereignty (Kim, 2011; Choung et al, 2011; Lee, 2015). These researches have contributed in describing and explaining the expansion of KWPA's activities and its implications. However, they were not enough to show the deeper philosophical basis of KWPA's recent activities or the socio-ecological implications of KWPA's activities to broader issue of food system.

We examine the KWPA's activities as a case study of an alternative agri-food movement based on the agroecological paradigm. We investigate how agroecology and the KWPA's activities have influenced the alternative agri-food movement in Korea. In this paper, we first review important principles of agroecology and then examine how agroecology is important in the food sovereignty movement, which has greatly affected the KWPA's activities in Korea. This will be followed by the explanation of the backgrounds of the KWPA's activities in the context of larger agricultural system. Then, we investigate the concrete activities and programs of the KWPA as an alternative agri-food movement to realize food sovereignty and agro-ecologism.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Agroecology: Going beyond industrial farming.

Agroecology emerged as a response to the negative environmental, social, and economic externalities of the agro-industrial system (Rosset and Altieri, 1997; Vandermeer, 2010; Fernandez et al., 2013). The most influential work in critically rethinking industrial farming was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which led many actors, including environmental groups, to demand a radical transition to alternative forms of agriculture that would reduce the agrochemical load on ecosystems, wildlife, food, and people (Rosset & Altieri, 2017). Early in its development, agroecology focused on agronomy-based sciences such as pest management, diversification of cropping systems, etc. However, through engagement with social scientists, dialogue with other knowledge systems, and direct involvement of local agricultural communities, agroecology has moved beyond the agroecosystem scale towards the broader scale of food systems, defined as global network of food production, distribution, and consumption (Gliessman, 2007; van der Ploeg, 2009; Rosset & Altieri, 2017).

The key idea of agroecology is more than promoting alternative farming practices—it includes developing agro-ecosystems with minimal dependence on high agrochemical and energy inputs (Altieri and Toledo, 2011). The industrial food production system inevitably depends on outside resources such as chemical inputs and fossil fuels and it leads to a loss of biodiversity and soil degradation in rural areas. Furthermore, industrial farming has resulted in the dissolution of rural communities and traditional knowledge accumulated by local farmers over time. Unlike industrialized food production, agroecological production emphasizes biodiversity and the protection of indigenous knowledge. The core principles of agroecology include recycling nutrients and energy on the farm rather than introducing external inputs, enhancing soil organic matter and biological activity, diversifying plant species and genetic resources in agro-ecosystems over time and space, integrating crops and livestock, and optimizing interactions and the productivity of the total farming system rather than the yields of individual species (Gliessman, 1998). Agroecological production is not intensive in its use of capital, labor, or chemical inputs. Instead, it relies on biological processes such as photosynthesis, nitrogen fixation, and the solubilization of soil phosphorus (Altieri, 2012). Sustainability and resilience are achieved by enhancing the diversity and complexity of farming systems.

In small-scale agriculture, farmers are the bearers of ecological knowledge. They plant local crop varieties, exchange seeds, and share agricultural knowledge. In this sense, agroecology is based on techniques developed through farmers' knowledge and experimentation over many decades, if not centuries. Agroecology emphasizes the capability of local communities to experiment, evaluate, and scale-up innovations through farmer-to-farmer research and grassroots extension approaches (Altieri and Toledo, 2011). For this reason, agroecology is socially activating, as it requires community participation and horizontal methods of knowledge exchange (Altieri and Toledo, 2011). Thus, it can easily be combined with social movements to build alternative systems.

At a local level, agroecological practices have merged with transnational agrarian movements such as *La Via Campesina*, the Landless Peasant Movement of Brazil, and the *Campesino a Campesino* Movement for food sovereignty (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013). Grassroots campaigns and civil society declarations have attempted to link agroecological practices with political practices or development strategies (Holt-Gimenez and Altieri, 2013). *La Via Campesina* is steadily spreading agroecological approaches throughout its own farmer organizations as well (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

Therefore, Wezel et al. (2009) argue agroecology is not just a science but also a practice and a movement. This expanded definition of agroecology paralleled the rise of alternative agri-food movements. In the following, we discuss how agroecology has been combined with alternative agri-food movements, such as food sovereignty, and has merged as a strategy in challenging industrial agriculture paradigms.

## 2.2. Agroecology and food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty movements emerged in the 1990s when the global agrarian crisis was intensified by trade liberalization and support for domestic agricultural sectors across the global South was increasingly being withdrawn (McMichael, 2014). The concept of food sovereignty was put forth in the *Nyeleni* Declaration by *La Via Campesina*, an international peasant organization. Food sovereignty's policy framework has seven principles: food as a basic human right, genuine agrarian reform, protecting natural resources, reorganizing food trade, ending the globalization of hunger, social peace, and democratic control (Pimbert 2008; cited by Fernandez et al., 2013). As such, the ideology of food sovereignty movement is strongly against neo-liberal food systems dominated by large transnational food companies or the corporate food regime. Currently, leaders in the international food sovereignty movements have embraced agroecology as a key strategy (Martinez-Torres & Rosset 2010; Altieri & Toledo, 2011).

Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2013) consider agroecology to be one of the three key pillars in the construction of food sovereignty, along with defense of land territory and national and local markets. Agroecology has brought farmers' knowledge back into the agricultural process, which then contributes to the empowerment of farmers and rural communities. Through agroecological science, small-scale farmers and peasants who suffered under the corporate food regime can be more independent in their farming and community lives.

In recent years, local networks for agroecological practice have merged with transnational agrarian movements for food sovereignty. For example, *La Via Campesina* is spreading agroecological approaches throughout its peasant organizations and networks (Martinez-Torres & Rosset, 2010; *Via Campesina*, 2010; Holt-Gimenez & Altieri, 2013). Furthermore, the combination of agroecology and food sovereignty generates massive social pressure. This pressure can lead to grassroots campaigns and civil society declarations linking agroecological to political practice (*La Via Campesina*, 2012), the adoption of agroecology as a development strategy (Holt-Gimenez & Altieri, 2013), and constitutional reforms to institutionalize food sovereignty, as Ecuador's food sovereignty law demonstrates (Patel, 2009).

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Data and material

This paper presents a qualitative research study which attempts to understand and interpret the implications of agroecology for the alternative agri-food movement. Hence, our research uses various qualitative data to trace the trajectory of the KWPA's activities and its ideas. Our data includes academic papers, existing literature, materials published by the KWPA, webpages, and interviews with the staff and members of the KWPA.

This study employs of two kinds of analysis. First, we conduct a theoretical and conceptual discussion of agroecology as a new paradigm for sustainable food system. For this task, we use existing articles and books to clarify the meaning of agroecology and to explore the social implications of its relationship to our case studies. This includes a critique of industrial farming and a careful examination of agroecology vis-a-vis agro-industrialism to highlight the academic as well as practical potential of agroecology. Second, we attempt an empirical analysis of alternative agri-food movements organized by the KWPA. The KWPA, on behalf of female peasants and as a new form of peasant movement in the neo-liberal era, launched its ISPM and SGP in the 2000s. The history and the current status of these two movements are presented using the internal documents of KWPA, research papers, and webpages. In addition, qualitative data acquired via face-to-face interviews with the staff of KWPA and a female peasant who participated in the indigenous seed preservation movement are used to understand the impact of these activities.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1. Korean Agriculture and the Foundation of the KWPA

The KWPA was founded in 1989 to protect the rights of female peasants and Korean agriculture. Due to the democratic movement sweeping South Korea during the 1980s, the agrarian movement has made great progress. Female peasants, who had been excluded and marginalized in the patriarchal rural communities, played an important role in the movement. The KWPA is a representative organization of women peasants in South Korea and the members of its nationwide local organizations are from nine provinces and 60 cities.

The KWPA movement has been significantly conditioned by the restructuring of the global food regime and the agricultural policies of Korean government. To understand the KWPA movement, it is necessary to understand the context of Korean agriculture during the last three decades. Since the late 1970s, South Korea suffered from inflationary pressure caused by currency inflation in its overseas sectors and the pressure to import US agricultural products (Kim et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2013). The South Korean government argued that agricultural sector should be liberalized in order to assist the manufacturing sector in the name of comparative advantage. As South Korea recorded a trade surplus in 1982, the pressure to open up Korean agricultural product market by the United States and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) increased (Kim, 2014). During the Uruguay Round of GATT, virtually all agricultural products markets in Korea were opened. Under these international conditions, South Korea's agriculture underwent a radical paradigm shift to a neo-liberal

commercial agricultural system (Yoon et al., 2013). More concretely, the Korean farm sector became highly subject to the World Trade Organization (WTO) system and a series of free trade agreements (FTAs) followed, which sacrificed local agriculture. Arguably, South Korean agriculture has become completely subject to the global agri-food system, which in turn is controlled by a transnational agri-food corporations (Yoon et al., 2013).

Huge amounts of foreign agricultural products were imported due to liberalization policies, which put Korean farmers in deep financial difficulties. This led to a general crisis in rural communities. The number of farmers, which was about 8.5 million in the early 1980s, sharply decreased to 6.5 million in the 1990s (Kim, 2008). Rural household income dramatically declined and environmental degradation become worse. Korean peasants, including the members of KWPA, strongly resisted the free trade policies of the government, but they failed to stop liberalization. Through struggles in Cancun, Mexico against the WTO and free trade and protests against the Korea-Chile FTA, the KWPA made contact with international social movement groups and world peasant organizations like La Via Campesina. Through interacting with La Via Campesina, the KWPA became more aware of the problems of industrial food production and the global agri-food system. By joining La Via Campesina in 2004, the KWPA adopted the concept of food sovereignty and began to emphasize agroecological production in its domestic programs.

#### **4.2. Agroecology and KWPA's Alternative Agri-food Movement**

By joining La Via Campesina and interacting with other Korean groups, the KWPA actively integrated the concept of food sovereignty and agroecology. Leaders of the KWPA had internal discussions about the direction of their movement before they joined La Via Campesina. Since the impact of structural-adjustment policies was more severe to female peasants, the KWPA realized the necessity for a further strategic initiative in addition to resistance to the government's farm policies (Yoon et al., 2013). The KWPA has expanded their movement in a more sustainable and ecological direction. The ISPM and SGP are two examples of such efforts. In the following section, we outline these activities and analyze their agroecological implications.

#### **4.3. Indigenous Seed Preservation Movement (ISPM).**

The ISPM is a campaign to protect native seeds which have long been planted in Korea. When the KWPA participated in La Via Campesina's biodiversity committee in 2005, the KWPA encountered issues related to seeds and shared the experience of Third World women peasant movements. In addition, by participating in anti-GMO movement with other environmental groups and organic farming movement groups in Korea, the KWPA realized that seeds are one of farmers' basic rights and a means of protecting biodiversity. The internal educational materials of the KWPA states:

Seeds do not simply represent a source of food for women peasants. Protecting native seeds is one of the rights of women peasants and one of the necessities for sovereignty in energy, food, natural resources for local communities (KWPA, 2008).

The KWPA collected and tried to save native seeds from across the country. Seeds were identified through local inspection and distributed through a "one-household, three-native-species" campaign to members of the KWPA. In order to keep and inherit native species, the KWPA ran native seeds-gathering farms. Then, produce grown from indigenous seeds was delivered to urban consumers via the SGP project, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program.

The ISPM incorporates agroecological principles into its operations. First, seed management is the most important knowledge and technology needed by farmers in agroecology. Under commercialized agriculture, the privatization of seeds and the development of genetically modified seeds by a few transnational seed companies endangers food security, farmers' rights, and natural ecosystems. Therefore, saving native seeds and species biodiversity are very important aspects of agroecology. Women peasants in particular had been responsible for collecting and sorting seeds after the harvest in the past. Yoon Geum-Soon, an important staff member of the KWPA, stated this in an interview:

Managing seeds was women's work in traditional rural areas. Women collected and kept seeds for next year's planting. Seeds were mostly stored in the kitchen, which was the space for women. In the process of managing seeds, women peasants learned the characteristics of species, like what kind of species are resistant to blight or when is the best time to plant them, and so on (Kim, 2012, p.93).

Second, while collecting and raising native seeds, the KWPA rediscovered the accumulated agricultural knowledge of an older generation. Elderly women peasants in rural areas had kept native seeds for a long time, and they also knew how to raise them. When members of the KWPA had trouble raising native seeds, elderly female peasants were important "experts" to solve the problems and explained how to raise the seeds. In this way, the KWPA found traditional farm knowledge that had been passed by women farmers from generation to generation. Shim Moon-Hee made the following observation:

I thought the native seeds had already disappeared, but some grandmas had been planting them in their gardens to feed their families....I met an old lady from Yeosu....She is 72-year-old, doesn't know how to read, but she knew everything about farming like when she has to plant seeds or the right time to compost the field...That's the real knowledge, the traditional knowledge of women peasants (Kim, 2012, p. 94).

In agroecology, farmers' traditional knowledge is crucial for sustainable agriculture. Its emphasis on local, shared knowledge is important not only for maintaining ecosystem integrity and revitalizing rural economies but also for realizing the food sovereignty of those involved in food production and consumption. By participating in the ISPM, members of the KWPA were able to perceive the importance of the knowledge of older peasants and to regain relationships with older generations.

#### 4.4. Sisters' Garden Plot

The "Sisters' Garden Plot" project, a version of community-supported agriculture (CSA), was begun in 2009 to achieve greater food sovereignty by using a communal approach to the production and consumption of agricultural products. The SGP movement was an effort to create an alternative method of food distribution and to make a consumption system that supports the indigenous seeds movement. In 2008, the KWPA started a project called "Guardians of Food Sovereignty" in collaboration with the Korean National Women's Alliance. Through this project, the KWPA had a chance to meet consumer groups and realized the importance of alternative food distribution systems. Around the same time, the KWPA learned about CSA by observing the *teikei* system in Japan when they interacted with the Japanese family farmers group *Nouminren*.

In most CSA programs, consumers invest funds, labor, and other resources on farms and become shareholders. The shareholders incur along with the farmers both the risks and the benefits of food production (Lyson, 2004). SGP is producer-led CSA project, as producers take the majority of the responsibility for managing the project. Shareholders are seen as "subscribers" and have minimal involvement in the day-to-day operation of the farm (Lyson, 2004). Subscribers receive a box of food and other agricultural products on a regular basis. In SGP, consumer members pay about \$50 to \$100 USD per month and receive a food box biweekly or weekly. Consumers are allocated to the closest producers, but that can be changed at the consumer's request. Producer members offer a variety of food such as eggs, vegetables, fruits, herbs, and even processed items like tofu and kimchi.

Currently, 240 women producers from 17 farming communities are participating in SGP throughout the country. In general, there are 8-20 producers in one community, and more than 3,000 boxes are delivered to individual and family members each month (KWPA, 2016). The central committee of the KWPA handles overall operations like consumer management and producer community support, but the autonomy of communities is ensured. There are leaders in each community, and they help communicate between local members and the central committee. Producers can decide what to produce and what to deliver to member consumers. Every Tuesday, member producers have to take part in communal work, which includes packaging and shipping boxes. They also discuss items and prices and evaluate their items based on feedback from member consumers. Through this weekly collaborative work, members can communicate with each other and rebuild local communities. Since 2016, SGP has been newly established as women peasant cooperatives. The SGP also promotes agroecological thought and practice in many ways. First, the production system of SGP is closely linked to agroecological practices. The following are the Sisters' Garden Plot Operations Guidelines the SGP: Practice ecological agriculture and traditional farming methods using natural pesticides and compost; Use a kitchen garden to grow seasonal foods. The size of the garden is recommended to be about 0.2 ha (per member), a manageable scale for producer members; Expand native seeds farming; Try not to use agricultural chemicals or chemical fertilizers; Keep the communal workplace clean (KWPA, 2016).

In the SGP regulations, the KWPA emphasized agroecological production. In



agroecological production, external inputs are replaced by natural processes, reducing the need for outside resources and improving the real efficiency of the farming system. A wide variety of technologies are involved in agroecological production, which includes making natural compost and fertilizers to enrich soil, finding natural methods of pest control, and diversifying cropping systems. Hence, the KWPA educates local farmers about these skills. Small-scale farming and planting native seeds are encouraged to promote agroecological production and to maintain biodiversity. Various sustainable and ecological agricultural techniques are adopted in SGP. Crop rotation, companion cropping, and crop-livestock systems are employed to preserve soil and allow nutrient cycling. In natural ecosystems, waste can be used as valuable ingredients for soil. Agroecological practices support biological processes that drive the recycling of nutrients, biomass, and water within production systems, thereby increasing resource-use efficiency and minimizing waste and pollution (FAO, 2018). Women peasants in the KWPA have experienced the improvement of soil, a rise in productivity, and lower financial costs. Since 2015, the KWPA has run an agroecology lab to carry out various experiments for agroecological farming. Finding effective herbs to protect plants from pests and exploring companion cropping and inter-cropping are some of the projects of the agroecology lab. The KWPA attempts to share the results of these experiments with local members.

Second, SGP offers an alternative distribution system to promote agroecological production. It is difficult to make a complete transition from industrial production to agroecological production a reality. It takes time to improve soil conditions and to produce yields as before with new farming methods. In addition, unstable agricultural market prices under the liberalized food regime make agroecological production even more difficult. Under these conditions, SGP, as a CSA, protects small farmers by guaranteeing agricultural prices. A female peasant said:

It takes lots of time and energy. Weeding is the hardest work—you have to pull all the weeds by hand...If the price collapses, then I don't want to work this way. At least, I need a stable income...I try [farming] this way because there is a CSA program, or it would be hard (Kim, 2016, p. 29).

Under the mass production and distribution structure, alternative methods of distribution, such as cooperatives or CSA programs, are necessary to protect agroecological production. In this sense, the SGP plays a great role in encouraging agroecological farm practices among producers.

Third, the SGP empowers women peasants by building their autonomy and capacity to manage their agro-ecosystems. FAO suggests that agroecology seeks to address gender inequalities by creating opportunities for women (FAO, 2018). Women peasants had not been fully appreciated in South Korea, even though they made up almost half of the agricultural workforce. In addition, their knowledge in food production was considered trivial. Since males were preferred in industrial agriculture, the poverty of women peasants had become more intense. However, women peasants could empower themselves by conducting agroecological farming and creating alternative ways of marketing their agricultural products. Through the SGP project, women peasants had a chance to earn money on their own. In particular, poor and elderly women peasants have benefited economically and socially thanks to the SGP project.

Fourth, SGP seeks to build solidarity and a circular economy that reconnects producers and consumers. FAO argues that agroecology prioritizes local markets and supports local economic development by creating mutually beneficially cycles (FAO, 2018). SGP is a socially-embedded economy, which builds social ties among the producers and consumers within the food system. The SGP's CSA program makes it possible to build a food community by establishing trust and solidarity between consumers and producers. SGP attempts to realize agroecological principles by recovering social relationship among the participants.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper attempted to show that agroecology serves as an important principle for overcoming the existing industrial food system and agro-industrialism. By examining the Korean case study of the KWPA, we have shown that alternative agri-food movements, emphasizing food sovereignty and agro-ecologism, can bring about significant change. Concrete examples such as the ISPM and SGP were presented as evidence. These programs greatly differ from the dominant agro-industrial model of agriculture in the sense that they are ecologically sustainable and socially embedded. Another important finding from the examples is that female peasants, often elderly and among the most socially disadvantaged in rural communities, have played an active role in these alternative agri-food movements. Female peasants, by preserving and sharing indigenous seeds and providing seasonal farm products to member consumers, demonstrated that they were important social actors for agroecology and food sovereignty. Their small yet impactful efforts are expected to make significant changes in the food system. More urban residents, including young women, are not only concerned about food safety and quality but also the socio-ecological aspects of what they eat. The KWPA's activities have been well received by some of these new consumers. This might point to the possibility of building a sustainable food community consisting of rural producers and urban consumers.

We would argue that the ISPM and SGP movement are important efforts to re-contextualize food in local ecosystems and to reconnect social relations centered around food. At a more macro-theoretical level, agroecological approaches may represent an alternative method of producing and providing food to overcome the limits of the neo-liberal corporate food system. Furthermore, agroecology may shed new light in rethinking about development. While South Korea is regarded as a model case of post-war development worldwide, Koreans today suffer from high suicide rates, depression, and stress. Hence, the dominant conceptualization of development based purely on economic indexes and urban-industrial lifestyles needs to be critically questioned. Agroecology can be an important resource for deconstructing the existing concept of development and reconstructing the concept based on sustainability. The new concept of development should be one which reconnects the relationship between nature and human beings.

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