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Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Food Sovereignty: Experiences from KWPA's Movement in South Korea

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Abstract

This study conducted a case study about indigenous seed preservation movement led by Korean Women Peasants' Association (KWPA) working for the food sovereignty as an alternative to the current global food system. In particular, it examines primarily on how peasant women's knowledge, which had been looked down on was reinterpreted into the main mechanism of the food sovereignty movement by KWPA as one of the major points of their movement. This study deals with peasant women's positions and contributions which have been rarely appreciated in the process of industrialization of Korea from an agricultural society. It, in particular, focuses on women's knowledge and how it has been regarded under the condition of subsistence production mode which largely relied on their knowledge. The existing studies about peasant women, nevertheless, have placed heavy weight on understanding women's roles and activities to improve their status. The indigenous knowledge of peasant women, which has been treated as useless in the process of modernization, is reconsidered in-depth as an alternative knowledge inevitable for sustainable development, but rarely discussed in Korea.

Introduction

Currently, South Korea is one of the fastest industrializing countries in the world, and this has resulted in a dramatic decline in agriculture. For example, the percentage of farmers in the total population has decreased from 50 percent in the 1970s to 7 percent (or below) in the 2010s, and more than one-fourth of the farmlands have since disappeared. Over the past four decades, farm income has increased by approximately 120 times, while debt has increased more than 1,600 times. In fact, South Korea's agriculture disintegrated rapidly in the process of industrialization, and under the influence of the global agri-food system (Yoon, Song and Lee, 2013). U.S. government had pressured to open up the agricultural market to South Korea since 1979 when it partly opened to U.S. However, the agricultural market of South Korea has been fully open since the agricultural agreement of Uruguay Round in 1993 and WTO launch in 1995. South Korea's grain self-sufficiency, which was over 70 percent during the mid-1970s, is now approximately 20 percent. Moreover, it is only 3.7% not counting grain self-sufficiency. In fact, South Korea is heavily dependent on food import by global food corporations it is now over 60% (Lee, Song and Kim 2009:58).

The food sovereignty movement and discourses in South Korea have been led by *Nong-Min* (agricultural people/civil/producer) groups such as KWPA (Korean Women Peasant Association) and KPL (Korean Peasant League) after joining the member of Via Campesina in 2004. The international food sovereignty conference was initially held in Seoul organized by KWPA and

KPL and hosted by Via Campesina. At that time, KWPA and KPL had begun the rice protection movement as a food sovereignty movement for the first time before the “Rice Renegotiation” with major rice importers, such as the United States and China, which sought to extend the rice tariff imposing period, had officially started. The food sovereignty movement has been spreading widely to find alternative agriculture in South Korea nation-wide since mid-2000. Recently, KWPA won the 2012 Food Sovereignty Prize for promoting food sovereignty, women’s rights and the survival of small-scale Korean farmers.

To understand the women’s indigenous knowledge and food sovereignty in South Korea, it asks following questions; what was the key factor to run the food sovereignty movements in Korea especially KWPA? How KWPA reconsidered women’s indigenous knowledge? What is the women’s indigenous knowledge? Who are the subjects of this knowledge? How women’s indigenous knowledge influenced KWPA’s food sovereignty movement? What are the achievements and challenges on their movement? Can women’s indigenous knowledge be an alternative for food sovereignty?

Methodology

This study conducted a case study about the indigenous seed preservation movement led by Korean Women Peasants' Association (KWPA) working for food sovereignty as an alternative to the current global agri-food system. It carried participatory observations and 13 in-depth interviews with women peasants in 2 local communities (*Hoengseong, Haman*) in South Korea in 2010.

The interviewees can be divided as 2 groups. One is a young generation of women peasant activists in their 30s~50s, who returned to farm and joined KWPA. They started indigenous seed farming 2009. The second group consists of older generation women peasants in their 60s~80s who farmed indigenous seeds for more than 50~70 years in their local community. They lived through Japanese Occupation and the Korean War, and received little education. Most of them are illiterate, but experts of indigenous agriculture. They are small-scale peasants and have preserved indigenous seeds and farming.

This study deals with peasant women’s positions and contributions, which have been rarely appreciated as the Korea shifted from an agricultural society to an industrial one. It specifically focuses on the contribution of the women's knowledge to the food sovereignty movement, and how it has been regarded under the condition of subsistence production mode, which largely relied on their knowledge. The existing studies about food sovereignty, nevertheless, have placed heavy emphasis on understanding seed politics and the small farmer’s role (McMichael,

2010; Kloppenburg, 2010; Wittman 2010) without gender perspective. The principle of food sovereignty increasingly considers women's contribution in food production and means changing both the food production and consumption model based on the increasing contribution of women. The Declaration of Rights of Peasants - Women and Men, declared by Via Campesina in 2007, emphasized that the food sovereignty can bring about positive changes for gender equality in the global agri-food system.

KWPA's Indigenous Seed Preservation Movement

The recognition of indigenous seed as a significant alternative to GMO (Genetically Modified Organism) has been on the rise since the mid-2000 in South Korea, thanks to the discourses of alternative development paradigm and food sovereignty worldwide. The indigenous seed movements in South Korea are run by various agricultural groups such as KWPA, National Office Return to the Farm Movement, and Heuksalim. Each of these organizations has different goals, such as food sovereignty, ecological movement, or safe food movement and recovery of traditional agriculture to find a way to overcome the current global agri-food system. In 2007, they established the Seedream Network to preserve and share indigenous seed nation-wide between the individuals and organizations. Now more than 6,000 individual members are joining the Seedream Network.

KWPA is especially dedicated to focusing on indigenous seed preservation in farming communities as the food sovereignty movement. Actually, there had always been local food movements such as the *Shintoburi* Movement whose aim was to solve the industrial agricultural system since the green revolution. However KWPA's indigenous seed preservation movement deals with women peasant's knowledge, which had been looked down on, but is now being reinterpreted into the main mechanism of the food sovereignty movement as one of the major points of their movement.

The women peasant activists from the *Hoengseong* Women Peasant Association, one member of KWPA, and activists of environment organizations as the anti-GMO Network first tried to cultivate indigenous seeds in 2004. It was difficult to find the indigenous seeds. Finally, they received indigenous beans from one employee of the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation. Each member was given three indigenous beans to cultivate, and decided to meet again one year later. However, no one was successful in cultivating the indigenous beans due to the lack of knowledge on how to farm, except one women peasant. She was a peasant woman over 60 years of age who was living in the *Hoengseong* area and yielded 600 grams of indigenous beans from the three beans she was given. The activists of *Hoengseong* Women Peasant Association realized that the knowledge of women peasants in their 60s, 70s and 80s were the key agents in the indigenous seed preservation. Most of the KWPA activists were

returning to the farm from the city and got used to the industrial farming system. They usually bought all materials for their farming, from seed to fertilizer, even for organic farming. They didn't know how to cultivate indigenous seed due to the lack of knowledge, so they tried to conduct a field research to find and gather the indigenous seed and knowledge from *hal-mo-ni* (grandmothers) in their rural community. It was an opportunity to meet and learn across generations of women peasants. Women in their 30s and 50s returning to farming were able to learn from older generation of women peasants who had been farming for more than forty years as a substitute small-scale farming. The young generation makes it possible to reconsider the role and value of women peasants, who had been undervalued and excluded from the capitalized market economy system in the process of modernization.

Now the indigenous seed movement is forging on through various projects by KWPA women peasant, young and old, in more than fifteen cities and eight provinces nation-wide in South Korea. They collect indigenous seeds and record indigenous knowledge from *hal-mo-ni* in their local community, and cultivate the seed farms. They also held indigenous seed festivals and campaigns. KWPA published books to protect the peasant's right to seeds according to the enforcement of UPOV (International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants).

The indigenous seed preservation movement had begun as a possible solution to the problem of GMO in the global agri-food system. In fact, to cultivate the indigenous seed that has features of traditional agriculture, which is considered a local natural environment that contrasts from the current industrial agriculture. However, South Korean agriculture has been industrialized since the 1970s through the Green Revolution and *Saemaeul* (New Community) Movement, which were promoted using all the characteristics of the autocratic military regime. Farmers were forced to join the development project and their indigenous knowledge and skills were disregarded. They lost their local agricultural culture and system for four decades.

To develop the indigenous seed movement, it requires two conditions: indigenous seeds from local community and the knowledge of women peasants who have been cultivating the indigenous seeds for a long time. Some women have kept their indigenous farming through the industrialization process of agriculture. Their common characteristics are that they have small-scale farms and are over 60 years of age (Hyo Jeong Kim, 2010; Hyo Jeong Kim, 2011). The South Korean government implemented the agricultural policy for the large-scale farming after the Korean War. To receive the benefits of this policy, farmers had to have a large parcel of land and capital to afford machineries and irrigation. Some peasants remained small-scale producers and maintained their indigenous agricultural practices because they could not actively participate in the government program due to lack of capital. Women peasants, in particular, have kept the indigenous seed because of the traditional gender division of labor.

Women have traditionally been seed keepers and seed breeders. The knowledge and skills related to seed conservation and seed breeding have been women's expertise. The seed economy was women's economy. Women have acted as custodians of the common genetic heritage through the shortage and preservation of grain. In a study of rural women of Nepal, it was found that seed selection is primarily a female responsibility. In 60.4 percent of the cases, women alone decided what type of seed to use, while men decided in only 20.7 percent (Shiva, Vandana, 2010).

Women peasant's CSA for the Food Sovereignty

The *Unnine Tutbat* -Sister's Garden Plot (SGP)- is a food sovereignty movement and has been a member of CSA (Community Service Agriculture) of KWPA since 2009. It seeks to achieve greater food sovereignty in South Korea by using a community approach to the production and consumption of Korean agricultural products. The healthy, locally grown, seasonal and organic produce cultivated by women peasant communities is sent directly to the urban consumers on a regular basis. SGP goals include sustainable, organic farming, protecting biodiversity, preserving indigenous seeds, and realizing peasants' rights. By operating on principles of food sovereignty, Korean women peasants can not only help protect the natural environment and reduce carbon emissions, but also ensure that healthy food remains affordable to the general public (KWPA, 2013).

Recognized as a social enterprise in 2012, SGP is supported by Ministry of Employment and Labor. Now SGP consists of 15 communities nationwide including *Hoengseong, Hongcheon, Osan* (Kangwon Province); *Kimje, Gochang* (N. Jolla Province); *Sooncheon, Naju* (S. Jolla Province); *Sangju Bonggang, Geumso* (N. Kyungsang Province); *Hamahn, Gosung* (S. Kyungsang Province); *Seogwipo, Jeju* (Jeju Island). The organization works with around 150 women peasant producers, two-thirds of whom are over sixty years of age. Each week, 3,500 families and individuals receive a seasonal box including fresh seasonal vegetables, organic eggs, tofu, and traditional food—a regular box is roughly 25USD, and 20USD for one-person families. It is very different from industrialized food systems. Consumers follow producers' decision and receive seasonal products, contrary to the current main food distribution system, which is influenced by consumers' needs rather than seasonal limitations. SGP is trying to build solidarity between consumers and producers through various projects such as community farming and consumer meetings.

Women peasants who participate the SGP were able to improve their economic rights. Even though women population in rural areas is 51.4% and 43.9% is over than sixty, 78.7% of women peasants have no land and 83.6% of women peasants earn a monthly income of under 400 USD

compared to the average monthly income of 1,700USD in South Korea (Statistics Korea, 2008). Because of the gender inequality, women peasants rarely have their own economic rights. Also, small-scale peasants, especially old women peasants, can't sell their products through the mass food distribution system. Since it is difficult to find other means of distribution, due to their lack of capital, land, and skill, they remain subsistence agricultural producers.

Women Peasant's Knowledge And Its Influence On Food Sovereignty Movement

Women's work in the food system is based on their knowledge and skills. It is an exercise of their food sovereignty (Shiva, Vandana, 2010). The previous industrial society, women peasant had lived in their family and community collectively and farming had been sustained depending on natural environment. Therefore, various indigenous knowledge and skills had been required to provide clothing, food and shelter according to the community culture and natural environment. To understand the indigenous knowledge of women peasant, it is important to examine *hal-mo-ni's* indigenous farming labor.

1. Complex Knowledge related to Food, Clothing and Shelter

South Korea was an agricultural society before the modernization. Most women lived as peasants in agrarian communities, relying on the ecological circulation of nature. Women took on all the tasks of the family such as pregnancy, childbirth, caring, and domestic labor including farming for food under the patriarchal Confucian culture. Women had arranged food, clothing and shelter in their family and village for the purpose of subsistence in this period. Women kept and managed seeds, wove cloth, and made food with their own indigenous knowledge and culture.

Indigenous farming was connected with domestic labor. For example, women peasants raised various different beans to make sauce, tofu, and rice cake. Each bean has different taste and function. Some sorghum was for food and tall sorghum was used to make brooms. On the other hand, the goal of current agriculture is mostly to produce products for profit. The past subsistence production mode had complex features related to food, clothing and shelter. Therefore, the labor of agriculture was linked to domestic labor.

Women's labor of agriculture is not specifically visible in large part due to the combination of multiple tasks they take on. When a woman peasant goes to the garden plot to get some vegetables to prepare food for their family, she weeds the garden and feeds the livestock at the same time. Women peasants carry out different tasks according to the condition of climate, soil

and crops. Women play a very important role in cultivation. They are involved in seed selection, production, harvest, storage, processing, and last but not the least, cooking (GRAIN 2000).

After the harvest in the fall, make ramie clothes in winter. Hemp sows in *Hansik* (around April) and cut in summer. Cut the hemp, boil and scrub it. Scrubbed the hemp with my nails and nearly broke them. No time to let my nails grow. And then it's time to make thread with millet glue. Put some soybean sauce to make glutinous thread. When twisting the thread, lick it. Twisted the thread on my thigh, so my thigh skin was chafed and it burned. My lips were chapped. (Bok-in Woo, 82 years-old)

Bok-in Woo *hal-mo-ni* is an expert of *hansanmosi* (ramie clothes) in *An-dong* area. She got married when she was seventeen and learned how to make ramie clothes from her mother-in-law who was an Intangible Cultural Asset No.1 in *Gyeongbuk* province. It requires patience to make ramie clothes. After sowing the hemp seeds in April, the leaves of hemp can be harvested in July. Women peasants make threads and weave cloth from the leaves of hemp with their own indigenous knowledge and skills. However, people began to lose this skill in the transition from the agricultural society to the urbanized industrial society in the process of modernization. In other words, workers performing increasingly routine, fragmented tasks without understanding the principles underlying the production method resulted in the loss of indigenous skills in the process of modernization and the development of technology (Braverman, 1974). However there are few discourses about deskilling of agriculture.

As deskilling of agriculture persists, women peasants have increasingly less incentive to weave clothes and manage seeds themselves due to the development of technology and transition to industrial society. Peasants can buy everything such as seeds and fertilizer from markets. The changes of social structure resulted in the division of agricultural labor and domestic labor from the complex labor that included production of a wide range of food, clothes, and shelter in rural area. Farming labor became professional production of products to make a monetary valueprofit. Caring and domestic labor were separated from farming. Therefore, divided farming labor and domestic labor were not necessary the indigenous knowledge and skill which were developed by local culture and environment, but the expertise knowledge and skill of industrial society. Accordingly, indigenous knowledge including indigenous seeds skills and traditional farming information had become devalued and useless.

2. *Experiential Knowledge Based On Community Culture*

The traditional agricultural society of South Korea was sustained by family and village community based on natural environment. Peasants worked together through the *dure*

(cooperative group) and *poom-a-shi* (exchange of labor). While learning the skill and knowledge through education in the modern society, the past agricultural society had learned experiential knowledge from former generations with community culture as the foundation.

Seeds were selected and managed by women peasants. Much of this knowledge is gendered and passed down between generations from mothers and mothers-in-law to daughters and daughters-in-law. They embodied their knowledge requiring each process from sowing to harvest. Their knowledge and seed consistently have been localized along with their local climate, soil and natural environment. It was shared among the community and passed on to next generations. Peasants shared good seeds and useful agriculture skills, which came from years of experience and contributions of the entire village community, so it had a character of public property. It is because a seed was passed through all community villagers' hands.

Indigenous villagers raised various crops and livestock calling for nutritional and cultural needs. It is connected with local community. Also, they accumulated traditional knowledge on how to produce food and cook at the same time. Therefore, indigenous knowledge in each local community is a valuable heritage, which comes historically from agriculture, livestock and horticulture, as much as precious seeds (Nabhan, 2010).

However the industrial agriculture for high-yield, which is based on scientific Green Revolution, had made changes to the existing indigenous farming system and culture. Nevertheless, women have survived as the agent of bio-cultural experience which is rooted in particular space and time with the embedded knowledge and action under the contradiction and limitation from the gender blindness and value neutrality of patriarchal development discourses on the basis of the objectivity of western science (Braidotti et al, 1994; Mellor, 1998). Other women peasants have remained with small-scale plots in local community farming through the experiential knowledge and skills that are not recorded or printed under the industrial agriculture production that has manuals and brochures.

In the past, seeds were the most important resource shared among the community. However, in the transition of social construction, agricultural communities have collapsed and communal farming systems have changed. Now peasants purchase farming materials such as machineries, hybrid seeds, and chemical fertilizers from global corporations. They have a relationship with the government and global corporations individually without community cooperation.

3. *Bio-diversity Knowledge Based On Nature*

Many studies concerned with the protection of agro-biodiversity are initiated and managed by local women's groups. In India, women have initiated and engaged in a number of adaptation projects, which involve the revival of traditional seeds and the establishment of community seed banks. In Sri Lanka, a women-led project has been promoting the cultivation of indigenous roots and tuber crops, organic agriculture and integrated pest management, and seed bank establishment (Equator Initiative, 2008). Women's knowledge and role is crucial for agro-biodiversity (Shiva, 1994; Zweifel, 1997; Howard, 2003).

Traditional agriculture wasn't separated from natural environment. Women peasants sustained daily livelihood through agricultural production activities. Farming labor was a routine activity and a cultivation of the environment. Through farming, people looked after their families and livelihood. In the process of industrialization, people used the natural environment as resources to produce high-yield profits, whereas women peasants had an organic relationship with nature to care for the soil and crops. Whereas the industrial agriculture produces products in all seasons through greenhouses, summer used to be the busiest season and winter was off-season for peasants in the past. Women peasants didn't plan a specific schedule, but they farmed relying on the condition of climate and crops. Below is a diary of participatory observation in *Hoengseong*, which shows the women peasant's bio-diversity knowledge.

Hoengseong is located in a mountain area, so peasants tried to use small lands effectively to produce more products. The agent of garden plots, women peasants planted soybean and sesame seedlings between corns. When they cut the corn stalks after harvest corns, it is a good time to raise soybean and sesame crops with strong sunlight. Cut corn stalks are fed to cows. However it's not easy to crawl into the cornfield to plant soybean and sesame seedlings. The space between rows of corns is only 30cm and there are so many ants. Women peasants wore long pants, sleeves and a net on their heads to work in the cornfield. When they planted seedlings, they weeded at the same time. Seedlings have a weak stem, so it needs to take carefully and plant it well not to pluck out. *hal-mo-ni* also planted soybeans and sesames around the paddy fields and Korean indigenous lettuces between chili crops. Even when the available land is the size of a palm, she plants various crops. (Ae-gi Jeong. 83 years old, *Hoengseong*, 29th July, 2010)

Ae-gi Jeong farms a small-scale land with indigenous seeds based on natural environment. She used a small field characteristic of fields in mountains. This is not a method of her personal invention, but a common farming method in mountain area like *Hoengseong*. Corns are harvested on July and August, the same time soybeans and sesame seedlings are planted in the

cornfield. The cornfield gradually turns into soybean and sesame fields in September and October. This farming method better strengthens the fertility of soil than monoculture does. The knowledge of these biodiversity systems was women's knowledge. The erosion of biodiversity systems goes hand in hand with erosion of women's knowledge and their power related to knowledge. Women's work and power in the food system has declined as a result of the introduction of monoculture (Shiva, Vandana, 2010).

The industrial agriculture provides a standard and scientific professional knowledge and skills to certain groups. It is difficult to understand this knowledge without professionalism. However *hal-mo-ni* farmed the land with their experiential indigenous knowledge and skills based on their natural environment. Most of them were illiterate, but they know the language of natural environment. They sowed, managed and harvested various crops according to the conditions of climate and soil. Women peasants knew by sight and instinct, not by scientific tools or machine the time, weather, and land suitable for planting. It was the professional and skilled knowledge even if it was not recorded and published and backed up by scientific objectivity. Women peasants who cultivate indigenous seeds are not environmental activists, but their lives are rooted in ecological circulation and bio-diversity.

4. *Gender Division of Labor and Seed Management*

Women peasants mostly kept and managed seeds before the industrialization of agriculture. Women also were seed keepers and breeders from B.C. (Lewenhak, 1980). The gender division of labor surrounding seed can be commonly found in many countries in the world. It could be understood as women as caretakers in the roles of looking after the family and reproducing. According to the studies about women peasants in Korea, they also gathered, bred, kept, and planted seeds, especially farm or plot products (Joosook Kim, 1981: 54-55).

To the peasants, seeds were priceless. There is an old Korean saying, "Peasants never eat their seed even they are starving to death." Seeds are the origin of farming and valuable resources to begin their farming in the next year. Therefore, it was important to gather and select the best seeds and keep it until the next sowing season. Women peasants were the seed keepers and breeders who prepared for the next season. They had knowledge and skill to tell which ones are the good seeds, what time is the best to sow, how to prevent cross-breeding, when it is time to weed, and which crops are good to plant together. This embedded knowledge and skills were passed and shared in their community and family. The selected seeds, which had adapted to the local climate and soil, contained women peasants' knowledge, skills and know-how of many generations.

I think seeds are very small, so men can't manage and keep it well. Women are more careful in selecting them. Some seeds were kept in the kitchen and burned as insect repellent. This naturally became women's work. (Han Young Mee, 43 years-old, *Heong-seong*)

One woman peasant activist, Han Young Mee, said the reason why women have kept seeds is related to women's roles and place of domestic labor. Work concerning seeds was mostly performed in sites of women's labor, such as the garden, yard, kitchen, and shed, and they were features of women peasant's complex labor related to food, clothes, and shelter. Therefore, indigenous knowledge about seeds were passed and embodied on women peasant's experiences.

However, were women naturally or originally good at caring for and managing seeds? The discourses between essentialism and constructionism have conflicting views regarding women's caring labor and motherhood. Nevertheless, young women peasant activists have been empowered in their roles as seed breeders and keepers through the emphasis of essentialism as a woman. They claimed the garden and plot are women's workplace, and women are good at keeping seeds based on the ecological sensibility.

It's like an instinct similar to motherhood. It's not because of gender division of labor—it's due to ecological sensibility. Women are better at caring and nurturing than men. Women peasants didn't receive any degrees about seed breeding, but they are experts. In fact, most of young women peasants didn't know how to keep and select seeds, and they weren't interested in it. However, when they tried to select seeds, they just knew how to and what to do. (Yoon Keum Soon, 50 year-old, *Seong-Ju*)

Yoon Keum Soon emphasized the women's role of caring and motherhood are connected with ecological sensibility. She explained that this connection empowered women peasants to participate in the indigenous seed preservation movement. Women peasants did not identify as neutral producers, but women producers who are ecologically good at caring for living things. This identification as women producers helped them see their caretaking and motherhood in a positive light.

Even though women peasants have produced bio-diversity and kept seeds, they couldn't help but be outsiders in the patriarchal society. Moreover, women's knowledge and labor were treated as the un-knowledge and non-labor in the context of objectivity of science and value neutrality, which were performed by male authority (Chang, 1996: 180). Moreover women's labor and knowledge were based on the professional opinion and specific cultural and scientific

background it defined as a part of nature or natural behavior (Shiva & Mies, 2000). The seed management labor that is based on gender division of labor is not merely added chores for the already overworked women. These women's caring labor and motherhood could become a positive identity of women peasant producers in the movement.

The Challenges Of The Food Sovereignty Movement

1. *The lack of skill concerning indigenous seeds*

Young women peasant activists began to farm indigenous seeds for the first time through the indigenous seed preservation movement. For some women peasants who had experience farming for more than twenty years, going back to rural indigenous seed farming was not easy. Moreover, with commercialized terminator seeds, which can only be used or sold at the shop once, breeding, selecting and preserving them was not easy to do. In addition, there are various different ways to select and preserve seeds depending on whether the task is handled individually or in a group. Han Young Mee, a woman peasant activist in *Hoengseong* had been a farmer for more than twenty years when she started indigenous seed farming through the movement for the first time. She said it was totally different from industrialized agriculture that she was used to. She tried to preserve seeds the way old women peasants did, but she was unsuccessful because animals ate them or she forgot where she had left them for safekeeping. To manage seeds, knowledge and know-how are necessary. Other activists also discussed difficulties of indigenous seed farming. Seeds for different crops require different methods of cultivation, selection, and preservation. In fact, if they were unsuccessful in farming indigenous seed crops, they could not sustain their farms in the following year. Even if they were successful in gathering seeds, they had to put them aside until the next year. Therefore, it is essential to have organic relationships with local communities to farm indigenous seeds. Peasants sustained their farming with local communities by sharing their seeds, labor, and knowledge in the past. Current industrialized agriculture, however, rely the government or global companies to purchase seeds, fertilizer and other materials for the farm.

Actually, we are experts when it comes to our own farming. Just as I am with breeding pigs or cultivating lettuce, I am an expert when it comes to mono-cropping agriculture. However, I was a beginner on breeding and cultivating indigenous seeds. (Kim Mee Kyoung, 36 years-old, *Ham-An*)

One of the young women peasant activists, Kim Mee Kyoung, also said indigenous seed farming was really difficult to master. It was difficult to farm various seeds without knowledge and experience, but more importantly, it was necessary for them to make the extra effort to learn

how to cultivate. Most young women peasants were having difficulty farming indigenous seeds, which required more time and labor to sort and preserve. Even those who had been farmers for ten or twenty years found themselves beginners of indigenous seed farming.

I brought indigenous pink potato seeds from Ulleungdo Island to Hoengseong and shared it with my local community. The seedlings failed. The potato leaves of the new shoots were so weak. I didn't know what was wrong with them. (Han Young Mee, 43 years-old, *Heong-seong*)

Han Young Mee obtained Korean indigenous pink potato seeds from an acquaintance in Ulleungdo Island, but she failed to cultivate it. Actually, she was an expert on potato farming as a way of industrialized agriculture, but she didn't know how to breed indigenous potatoes. To sow and care for the indigenous seeds, the complex professional skill to understand local climate and soil was necessary. Young women peasant activists particularly experienced the common needs to learn skill and knowledge about indigenous seed from *hal-mo-ni*, old women peasants.

2. Increasing Labor of Women Peasants

KWPA tried to recover and improve women peasants' role and value as a seed breeders and preservers through the indigenous seed preservation movement, but it was not easy to cultivate various indigenous seeds. Sometimes traditional agriculture requires extra work on the part of the women. The work force rate of women peasants in South Korea was more than 50% (1.68 million people) in 2007 (Statistic Korea, 2008). It means women in agriculture are carrying too large a burden. In this situation, they are obligated to work more and spend more time on indigenous seed farming to learn and cultivate it.

KWPA has been running more than twenty sites of documented indigenous seed production nation-wide since 2009. Three sites are supported by the Rural Development Administration. While most of the fields are managed and cultivated communally, some are work with city consumers through networking. These farms also organize exhibitions to educate and inform on the importance of indigenous seeds to children, youth and city consumers. Women peasant activists in Haman manage 0.5 acres to communally farm thirty indigenous crops to gather seeds. However, the women live in different places in the Haman area, so some drive forty minutes to the field from their houses. It is a burden for women peasants who work in their own farm and look after their family in the particularly busy season. In fact, of the total time of women peasant's work force, 54.8% work 10-14 hours a day and 28.8% work more than 15

hours including farming, domestic labor and community work in the peak season (Kim & Kim, 2003:54). Sometimes, they came into conflict with their families.

I quarreled with my husband many times because of working at the communal field for seeds. He hates it that I neglect our farming work. (Han Seung Ah, 41 years-old, Haman)

Han Seung Ah cultivates organic tomatoes in greenhouses. The nature of the greenhouse farming she does is such that she need to work with her husband by turns to sustain the temperature and condition in the greenhouse. Moreover, she has to take care of her three children—drop them off at day care and school every morning and pick them up in the evening. When she went to the communal plot to farm indigenous crops sometimes, she could not pay attention to her own farming. Finally, she quarreled with her husband. Meanwhile, other activists who lived near communal plot worked more than others. If it rained too much, she and her family needed to work urgently at the communal plot. The objective of indigenous seed farming was not for money, so women peasant activists were having a difficulty keeping their communal field to cultivate indigenous crops without getting into conflict with their families.

The increasing labor was caused by indigenous seed agriculture led by women peasants. Some organic agriculture weakened the gender division of labor because of the features of organic agriculture that required more workforce than conventional agriculture. The greater need for labor force contributed to the increase of women's labor on their farm (Huh, 2004). Meanwhile, women peasants' indigenous knowledge based on local culture and ecological circulation of nature was devalued by the aspects of monetary value and productivity. The indigenous knowledge of women peasant has no economic meaning under the current conventional agriculture environment aimed at mass production to make money.

It could basically be a burden labor. Actually, it is quite meticulous work rather than a burden. Seed work is very varied and complex, so it's not increasing the labor force or time. Cultivating indigenous seeds mean to go for small-scale farming, not large-scale farming. (Yoon Keum Soon, 50 years-old, *Seong-Ju*)

However, one activist, Yoon Keum Soon said seed management is not making more work force, but that it is more a matter of labor intensity in the integrated agriculture work. It is valuable work that women peasants can find and recover their role and value through indigenous seed farming. KWPA explained that the seeds cultivated by the women peasants are the most important and valuable materials for sustainable agriculture; the seeds embody traditional knowledge, safe food, genetic resources, and cultural heritage (KWPA, 2008:8). Indigenous

seeds can sustain bio-diversity, preserve ecological environment, and recover local community and culture. This movement aims to realize the original objectives of agriculture and women peasants' role. Nevertheless, women peasants participating in the indigenous seed preservation movement have a burden of labor including production labor on their agriculture, domestic labor and child care, and seed management.

3. Economic Compensation Issue Under The Global Agri-food System

Women peasant activists had trouble selling indigenous crops, which were small and lacked of marketability in the beginning. They raised the issue of outputs and marketability on the indigenous seed movement.

Korean people, they don't like small products. They like big and colorful grains and vegetables. They prefer big ones. (Jung Eun Jin, 39 years-old, Hoengseong)

Jung Eun Jin, a women peasant activist in Hoengseong has cultivated several kinds of indigenous beans and millets, which she had been receiving from KWPA since 2006. The organic products from indigenous seeds were delicious, but small and unfamiliar to the consumers compared to high-yield products. It was also produced in small amounts so it was difficult to sell. Public markets require the standardization of food and agricultural products based on the mono-tastes of the consumers and the economic efficiency. As a result, it is difficult to achieve economic marketability of indigenous food without changing consumer perspectives.

The existing food system of demand-centered market does not take into consideration natural and seasonal factors. However, most of indigenous agricultural products depend on direct selling such as farmer's market or CSA. It has a low price competition and marketability. Indigenous seeds are necessary differentiations to overcome the price competition in the current market through multidimensional approaches such as food education and recovery of the value of the indigenous seed.

Even though farming the indigenous crops is difficult, it could be an advantage. It has a great genetic diversity and adapted low input agriculture. It provides a useful model on the organic interactions between the breeding and farming as the key factors of organic agriculture (Lee, 2009:35). It is connected to the questions such as which takes precedence, productivity and marketability, or diversity and effective value of agricultural products. On the other hand, some women peasant activists experienced that the amount of indigenous product was not that small.

As years went by, indigenous seeds proved more immune to diseases and insects than

improved seeds. The amount of products was also similar. Indigenous seeds have the strength of horizontal resistance so it can overcome the climate changes and damage. In fact, GMO and improved seeds that are considered high-yield products were supported by the paradigm of global famine and food shortage. Recently, the problem is a not a lack of food, but rather the inability to access it. In fact, grain production worldwide has tripled since the 1960s, while the global population has only doubled (GRAIN, 2008). Moreover, the industrialized agriculture resulted in infertile soil, overuse of water, chemical fertilizer and pesticide pollution, which destroyed bio-diversity and increased pollutions. As a result, we cannot adjust the value of increased products only, if it calculates the social economic loss of people who lost their lands because of mass industrialized agriculture.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are; firstly, indigenous seed movement in Korea suggested as an anti-GMO movement in 2000 by various groups including KWPA working for the food sovereignty. However activists of anti-GMO movement experienced difficulties in carrying out their indigenous seed farming because of a lack of skills in sowing, cultivating, and seed-gathering. KWPA activists provided a new insight utilizing peasant women's knowledge in searching for an alternative to GMO cultivation.

Secondly, the peasant women aged over sixties, *hal-mo-ni* have maintained their subsistence production based on small plot farming amidst of rapid social changes and transformation of agricultural system in South Korea. Their knowledge patterns feature a holistic tendency which includes all parts of living such as clothing, housing, and feeding. Also they are acquired through the hands-on experiences stemming from the agricultural community culture. Besides, this knowledge focuses on natural cycles, a primary feature of the agriculture in the past. It is observed that traditional seed preservation activities are usually assigned to peasant women, which display a sexually-segregated agricultural labor. In addition, the features of indigenous seed agriculture, which is primarily accomplished by the female's labor force, put more burdened on women's already heavy work load. They also experienced difficulties in obtaining financial gains because capitalist agricultural markets give little value to indigenous products.

Thirdly, despite of all, the KWPA activists are working together with *hal-mo-ni* to develop the indigenous seed preservation movement as the food sovereignty movement. However, stressing on the indigenous knowledge of peasant women doesn't mean that we should go back to the past and all kinds of indigenous knowledge are important. In order to disentangle the problem produced by global food system, it is important to understand the conditions of food sovereignty movement. In this sense, this paper aims to view the women's indigenous

knowledge as what has a potential to improve the women as subsistence agricultural producers and to recover the almost destroyed agricultural collective community in South Korea. At the same time, this study aims to value the indigenous agricultural knowledge as future-oriented form of knowledge.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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