

SOUTH KOREA

# Peasant Women's Solidarity for Food Sovereignty



# Background

Since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, the Korean agricultural sector has been opened to the world market. Agriculture is further liberalised through signing other bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs). South Korea has 18 signed and in-effect FTAs and five that were signed but not yet in-force. Eleven more FTAs are in the process of being negotiated. The opening of agricultural markets has led to a steady increase in agricultural imports, dampening Korean agriculture, particularly small farms. Until 2017, small family farms made up 71 per cent of farms in South Korea.<sup>1</sup> Historical data, however, show that the number of farmlands of more than three hectares in size more than doubled from 1970 to 2017 (from 37, 000 to 81,000)<sup>2</sup> indicating a slow but steady concentration of small farmlands into larger commercial farms. Grain self-sufficiency also fell to 20 per cent in 2013 from 70 per cent in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

The government's smart agriculture programme that started in 2008 aimed to improve agricultural yields through facility modernisation and precision farming. The programme plans to expand the smart greenhouses in horticulture to 7,000 hectares and the number of smart livestock farmhouses to 5,750 by 2022.<sup>4</sup>

However, this programme was criticised for promoting the corporatisation of agriculture because it focused on industrial food production. The programme also introduces technological solutions that are inaccessible to small farmers, especially peasant women, because they are expensive to install, operate and maintain. Meanwhile, multinational seed companies have started to occupy the seed market while native seeds that have long been used by Korean farmers are disappearing.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>1</sup> SIm, Jeong-bin. (2019). Structural change of Korean agriculture and recent major policy reform. Retrieved from <https://ap.fttc.org.tw/article/1587>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ahn, C., & Muller, A. R. (2013). South Korea: Ground Zero for food sovereignty and community resilience. Retrieved from <https://fpif.org/south-korea-ground-zero-food-sovereignty-community-resilience/>

<sup>4</sup> Park, K. (2021). Government smart farm policy, issues centered on facility agriculture and large farms. Retrieved from <http://www.ikpnews.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=43190>

<sup>5</sup> In FTA era, female farmers lead successful agriculture(2020, December 18 ). Nongchonyeoseongsinmun (Rural Women's Newspaper). Retrieved from <http://www.rwn.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=58140>





## FPAR Journey

Peasant women from the Uiseong community have become more vulnerable under the structural difficulties caused by the liberalised agricultural market, the patriarchal rural social structure that supports the subordination of women in agricultural roles, and the continued shouldering of the burden of un/der/paid care work by women. Despite the widespread of the Me-Too movement and the Republic of Korea government's attempt to enhance gender equality in various areas such as women's representation and protecting underprivileged women<sup>6</sup>, patriarchal order and customs are still dominant in South Korean society, particularly in rural areas. After discussing the objective and purpose

of the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), women from the Uiseong Community agreed to join the FPAR as coresearchers. From October 2019 to May 2021, the Sister's Garden's FPAR focused on understanding, documenting and investigating the impact of agricultural liberalisation on peasant women, and exploring alternative solutions such as agroecology. Despite the lack of support from the women's husbands and their families, combined with the physical distancing measures imposed by the government due to COVID-19, the women of Uiseong Community found ways to gather, discuss the problems caused by liberalised agriculture and patriarchy, and pursue alternatives.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner OHCHR. (2021, November 3). Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women considers the report of the Republic of Korea. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22690&LangID=E>

# FPAR Findings

## **Falling incomes, ballooning debts and lack of government support for agroecology amidst agricultural liberalisation**

Small farmers face stiff competition from imports and lack properly guaranteed agricultural prices because of agricultural liberalisation. Falling farm incomes on the one hand and the rise of prices of farm inputs on the other have led to financial difficulties among small farmers. According to the women, without proper support from the government, the more they farm, the larger their debt.

Burdened with the pressure to increase farm yields, transitioning to agroecology as an alternative is not an easy option as it requires a lot of time and effort, compared to chemical-based agriculture. According to the women, they already have the knowledge and skills on doing agroecology, but need support from the government in order for it to become a viable source of income.

**“We already know and understand ecological and alternative methods, but in reality, it is difficult to practice. In the course of practice, [the] solution could be a systematic support of the government”**

-Participant from Uiseong Community

## **Loopholes in the laws on gender equality in rural areas**

Despite the expansion and improvement of laws, systems and programmes to promote the rights and interests of women farmers and enhance gender equality in rural areas, large gaps still remain. For example, women farmers who participated in the FPAR said that the "Joint Owner Registration System" was a step forward in improving the professional status of women farmers. Before the establishment of the system, most of the female farmers were registered as family workers even if they jointly managed farming with their spouses. The husband was usually registered as the 'owner' and wife as a 'farmer'. This system allowed female farmers to register as co-owners. However, the social status of women did not change despite the introduction of the system. One of the weaknesses of the system is the inability of women to gain joint manager status if they work part time outside their farms.

## **Patriarchal gender roles maintain unpaid care work and the lack of women's voices in decision-making**

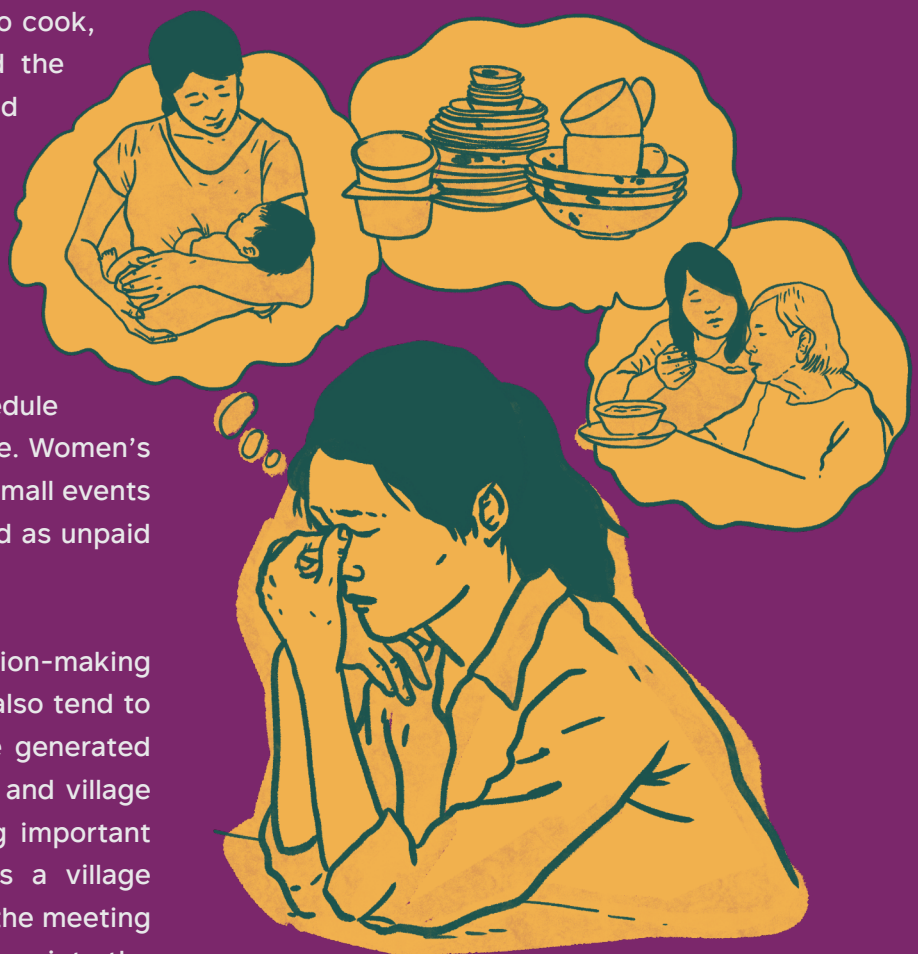
The patriarchal practice in farming villages where men are the farm owners and women are in the position of assistants still remains. Although female farmers account for half of South Korea's population and are the ones mainly in charge of more than half of the agricultural labour, female farmers have been perceived as being subservient to their male counterparts and their social status and rights were very low.

In the Uiseong Community, women are expected to play a more diverse social role than male farmers, for example, in agricultural product order reception, courier packaging, costumer response and participation in village events. On top of these tasks, they are also expected to cook, clean and care for the children and the elderly. Women have encountered disadvantages as a result of the motherhood penalty in a patriarchal society. For example, the women who are raising young children had a greater difficulty actively participating in Sister's Garden's activities because their schedule is fully occupied by care work at home. Women's labour in preparing for their village's small events and local festivals is taken for granted as unpaid volunteer work.

Male farmers mainly have the decision-making power over farm management. They also tend to own farms, house(s) and the income generated from farming activities. Male farmers and village adults often take the lead in making important decisions in villages. When there is a village meeting, the agenda and decision of the meeting are determined by men, while women go into the kitchen and prepare food for villagers.

**“The issue of system (policy) improvement and recognition should be connected. Especially in rural areas, the division of household labour is unrealistic. Conservative and patriarchal culture in rural communities have become normal and rampant.”**

-Participant from  
Uiseong Community







## Women's Empowerment

The FPAR has enabled the women of Uiseong Community to actively reflect on the community's and rural women's current situation and explore the way forward. Community solidarity has been strengthened during the discussion sessions. These discussions lead to the jointly planning and ecological native soybean cultivation. Collective planning, production and sales have strengthened solidarity among community members as well as strengthened the economic and social capabilities of the community.

Joint community-community initiatives were also created through the FPAR. The Uiseong and Sangju Bonggang communities developed cooperation activities. Among these is selling of the soybeans grown in Uiseong to Sangju Bonggang. This helped the communities support each other in securing livelihoods, spreading the use of native seeds and regaining local food sovereignty.

They also improved their knowledge and individual capabilities by learning each other's farming experiences through the labour exchange activities. Furthermore, the initiative on educating the young generation raised their awareness on indigenous/local soybeans via producing board games for kindergarten children.

**"I felt good when I shipped yuwolyangdae-kong (native beans) with Bae Geum-seon [another woman from my community]. I felt that it was very different to ship in the name of the community in comparison with individual shipments. Also, I thought it was meaningful to be able to make it in the name of the community"**

-Participant from  
Uiseong Community

# Recommendations

## For the government of South Korea

- Ensure clear parliamentary oversight over trade policy. Create mechanisms that will guarantee meaningful people's participation, including women's groups, in decision-making processes that affect agriculture, including in trade negotiations to ensure people's food sovereignty.
- Protect and support ecological agriculture and native seeds through laws and policies that provide direct subsidies and guarantee fair prices and incomes for agroecological farm produce.
- Review the "Joint Owner Registration System" and revise loopholes that are preventing women from gaining equal rights to the ownership of household farms.
- Recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. This can be met by providing child and elderly care support and joint meal initiatives during the farming season.

## For women in the community

- Collaborate with the Korean Women Peasants' Association to share cases of Sister's Garden activities with allies at different advocacy spaces at local, national, regional and international levels.
- Strengthen the solidarity and bond between community members who worked mainly on the individual level through joint activities such as cultivation of native soybeans and labour exchange activities.





## About Sister's Garden

The Sister's Garden, initiated by the Korean Women Peasants' Association, has long been involved in the women farmers' movement in Korea, to achieve women's self-reliance and protect food sovereignty through the sale of multi-species small-scale farm products. The Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) of the Uiseong Community was conducted with the impact objectives as "Peasant women of the Uiseong Sister's Garden community can cultivate indigenous beans as a common crop and strengthen solidarity among community members to achieve food sovereignty."



## About APWLD

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.



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