

# Policies for the Settlement and Social Activities of Women Turning to Farming and Rural Areas

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## Abstract

As a growing number of people turn to farming or to residence in farm villages, the phenomenon is drawing considerable social and policy attention. However, as only a fraction of this attention has been focused on the women involved, their actual status, the difficulties they face and their policy-related demands have yet to have been identified. Through in-depth interviews, this study analyzed the reasons why such women are turning to farming or to farm villages, as well as their identity, the education of their children, their economic activities and the formation of relationships with fellow villagers. The interviews were carried out with 15 women who had moved to farm villages in Jinan-gun and 15 women living around the country, including in Seocheon and Hongcheon. In order for these women who have turned to farming or to farm villages to successfully settle in these villages and contribute to their rural communities, additional opportunities should be provided for them to demonstrate their capabilities and talents. In addition, the culture of the rural communities needs to evolve to allow women to make their voices heard.

**Key words:** Women turning to farming or returning to farm villages, rural communities, rural women, agriculture human resource development, gender-sensitive female farmer policies

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## **Introduction: Research Purpose and Methods**

Currently, farm villages are experiencing enormous changes triggered by demographic shifts and adjustments to evolving industrial structures, such as a decrease in the population residing in farm households, the aging of the overall population, the growing number of women who move to farm villages after marriage, and the increase in the number of people turning to farming or returning to their home villages. As the composition of the population of farm villages becomes diversified and industrial structures take on different forms, the expectations for women's roles and contributions are expanding in terms of the development of rural communities, agricultural production and generation of non-farm income. The influx of these new human resources-women-into farm villages is highly likely to contribute to the revitalization of rural communities. In particular, given the forecast that the number of women turning to farming or returning to home villages will surge with the retirement of the baby boom generation, it is highly likely that women turning to farming or returning to home villages, considered as superb human resources, will actively participate in the activities of their rural communities.

Although the social and policy-based attention to people turning to farming or returning to home villages has been growing dramatically, it has mainly been directed toward men and little has been focused on women. There is a paucity of reliable statistical data on these women turning to farming or returning to home villages and their status, and only few policies have been aimed at their support. It is presently a timely matter to conduct studies on the adaptation of women turning to farming or returning to home villages in rural communities, as well as on the status and challenges of their participation in local society and on ways to better support them. Therefore, in order to offer assistance to these women, this study will analyze actual conditions and explore ways to provide policy-based support.

This research selected in-depth face-to-face interviews as its primary study method in order to examine the experience and demands of women turning to farming or returning to home villages. Some interviews were carried out in specific regions, while other interviews focused on cases from activities in various areas in diverse regions. Interviews were conducted with 15 women who had moved to farm villages in Jinan-gun and 15 women living around the country, including in Seocheon and Hongcheon.

Also, in order to shed light on the overall gender-related status of people turning to farming or returning to home villages, data from the Agriculture Human Resource Development Institute has been re-analyzed in terms of each gender. Through face-to-face interviews with officials from organizations providing education and support to people turning to farming or returning to home villages, as well as e-mail surveys of public officials responsible for projects aimed at attracting urban residents to farming villages, the problems facing women turning to farming or returning to home villages and the required support policies have been analyzed from diverse angles.

## Research Background

In the “Survey of the Status of People Turning to Farming or Returning to Home Villages,” the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries defined turning to farming as “moving to farming or fishing villages and engaging in agriculture”, and returning to home villages as a form of “moving to farming or fishing villages for the purpose of leading a rural life” (Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2012:5). While the government surveys the status of households turning to farming or returning to home villages, it does not look into their status by gender. Although the number of women turning to farming or returning to home villages is growing along with the expanding number of households turning to farming or returning to home villages, domestic policies directed toward such people provide little particular attention to women.

As a means to encourage more people to turn to farming and return to home villages, the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries has implemented its “Project to Attract Urban Residents to Farm Villages” since 2007. The ministry also announced “Comprehensive Plans to Support People Turning to Farming or Returning to Home Villages” in 2009, and carries out “Surveys of People Turning to Farming or Returning to Home Villages” in order to examine the status of households that move from cities to farming or fishing villages every year. As more people of the Korean baby boom generation move from cities to farm villages, the ministry has pushed ahead with farming policy as a key project<sup>5</sup> since 2012. This type of support policy from the ministry focuses on loan and subsidy projects aimed at providing farmland and residences to those moving to farming or fishing villages, as well as on training and consultation support projects aimed at instructing in or providing farming techniques or information.

According to statistics, the proportion of women participating in government-supported training on turning to farming and returning to home villages was very low. Women turning to farming or returning to home villages experience culture shock as they move from cities to farming villages due to androcentric philosophies, community culture and generation gaps among women. Because they do not enjoy the same rights and status as they did in cities, as well as living environments, they find it very difficult to adapt to their new environments. In order for people turning to farming and returning to their home villages to provide a benefit to the development of rural communities and individuals as well as to contribute to overall social development, relevant policies must support both men and women. It is necessary to examine the difficulties facing women turning to farming or returning to home villages, as well as their demands, and to develop policies to provide them with support.

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<sup>5</sup> In order to encourage more people to turn to farming or return to home villages, “Mr. Turning to Farming and Returning to Home Villages” has been selected as the minister’s policy agenda (brand).

## **Current Status of Women Turning to Farming and Returning to Farming Villages**

Since the number of households turning to farming or returning to their original home villages has recently been on a steep rise, it is likely that the number of women doing so is trending similarly. Since there are no gender-based statistics regarding the status of turning to farming or returning to home villages, the scale of women's participation cannot be accurately assessed except in terms of the number of households. According to a 2011, survey carried out by the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, while the number of households turning to farming or returning to home villages was 1,240 in 2005, the number rose to about 4,000 in 2010, and then jumped to 10,503 in 2011, an increase of 158% compared with the previous year.

In order to help illuminate some of the aspects of women turning to farming or returning to home villages in the absence of related gender-based statistics, existing survey data has been reanalyzed with a focus on gender. A survey was conducted by the Agriculture Human Resource Development Institute in 2011 among 1,084 participants who had completed training for turning to farming and returning to home villages (2009 and 2010). Men accounted for 82.3% or 892, with women making up 17.7% or 192.

Analysis of the survey result indicates that men showed a higher tendency to actually turn to farming or return to their home villages upon completion of training, and the largest proportion of those who decided not to do so cited a lack of the resources required for farming, such as financing and suitable land, as their primary reason for not doing so (41.4%). The largest proportion of both men and women (34.9% and 39.5%, respectively) reported that they decided to turn to farming or return to home villages because they considered living in farm villages to be preferable to living in cities. While the second-largest share of men (17.2%) reported that they moved to farm villages in order to "engage in farming in earnest," that of women (21.1%) stated that they did so "for themselves and their families." The third-largest proportion of both men and women, respectively 13.2% and 14.5%, replied that they moved to pursue a better life after retirement.

Among the respondents who actually turned to farming or returned to their home villages, 57.2% moved with their entire family, while 23.6% replied that the breadwinner moved alone and 7% answered that family members joined along after the breadwinner had moved first. In the case of women, 66.7% said that they moved with their entire family, which was a higher rate than that of men (55.4%). The proportions of women and men who moved with their entire family or who said that family members joined after the breadwinner had moved first were only 69.4% and 63.2%, respectively. When it came to the level of satisfaction, 64.1% of the respondents stated that they were satisfied with their lives after moving, with 63.3% of men and 68.4% women responding as such, respectively.

## Experience of Women Turning to Farming or Returning to Home Villages

In-depth face-to-face interviews were carried out in order to identify the difficulties faced in their rural lives by women who turned to farming or returned to home villages, as well as their demand for support from related policies. These interviews were conducted with 15 women who had moved to farm villages in Jinan-gun and 15 women living around the country, including in Seocheon and Hongcheon. The on-site study carried out in Jinan-gun focused on the overall settling process of women turning to farming or returning to home villages, as well as their ongoing lives. The interviews with women living in other regions focused on their experience of participating in various social activities, including education, culture, business foundation and village development. In order to provide various viewpoints on turning to farming and returning to home villages, face-to-face interviews were also carried out with five female local residents and 10 officials from organizations related to turning to farming or returning to home villages. In addition, e-mail surveys were circulated among municipal officials in charge of support projects for turning to farming and returning to home villages.

Through the face-to-face interviews, reasons for turning to farming or returning to home villages, changes in personal identity after moving, level of satisfaction, difficulties experienced, and aspects of participation in economic and social activities were all identified to some degree. The subjects had decided to move to farm villages for assorted reasons: a determination by their husbands, dissatisfaction with their jobs, educational environments for their children, family happiness, quality of life, interest in nature, and more. They elected to move because they expected farm villages to provide a space for "healing" and "a better life." The fact that they wished to move not because their husbands wanted to do so, but because they wanted it themselves indicates that they would be able to settle in farm villages independently.

When it came to their identity in rural communities, they defined themselves as "a person closer to cities than rural communities," "a woman living in a farm village," "a half-farmer," "just a new neighbor," "a farmer different from the other farmers" or "a person leading a rural life." Some of those who turned to farming or returned to their home villages relatively long ago thought of themselves as farmers or female farmers.

"Children's upbringing" was a critical reason why many women decided to move to farm villages: They wanted their children to develop sensitivity, play freely, and be liberated from the burden of extracurricular private classes and from being bullied due to disabilities. Respondents showed an active and progressive attitude to child rearing, and many of them were members of the steering committee of local schools, parent-teacher associations, and mothers' or fathers' associations. Most of the respondents demonstrated a positive view toward raising children in farm villages.

Having a job was a critical means through which women turning to farming or returning to home villages could lead a more normal life in a rural community and adjust to novel

social circumstances. They indicated a positive view toward holding a job and participating in self-development courses. They see farming as a part of “their career” or “fun” and engage in jobs beyond farming. There are many things that women can do in farm villages, and even trivial talents are often deemed useful. In rural communities, anyone—whether male or female—who does not work is highly likely to be sidelined from the mainstream of the community. In rural communities, women must work to demonstrate their identity and be included in the social core. That is, having a job for women in farm villages is not simply a means to subsidize a husband’s income nor merely a method to make ends meet; it is a method to remain independent while being included in the mainstream of rural communities.

Women who turned to farming or returned to home villages reported that farm villages were places where “people meddle in others’ business” and where “watching one’s mouth is very important.” Due to this characteristic of farm villages, establishing positive relationships with local residents is highly important for women who have turned to farming or returned to home villages in terms of settling there. While native-born local female residents may wish their new neighbors to respect the elderly, participate in village events, and intermingle with other residents, women turning to farming or returning to home villages consider this as meddling in their lives and being mean to outsiders; thus, it is necessary to better bridge the gap between these women.

Most women who turned to farming or returned to their home villages maintained a social network with people outside their villages, including people at work. They were connected with a social network outside their villages through school associations, volunteer groups, cooperative units, associations of people who turned to farming or returned to home villages, and other groups. These social connections helped them settle in rural communities. However, only a few of the subjects were members of existing organizations composed of women, and their husbands participated in official meetings such as village meetings and gatherings of people who turned to farming or returned to home villages, indicating their difficulty with speaking for themselves at official meetings of rural communities. Thus, it is necessary to establish an environment in which they can mingle through existing women’s organizations and participate in the official meetings of their villages.

While most of the women who turned to farming or returned to home villages described a positive view toward their life in their farm villages, viewing it as peaceful, relaxed and offering a higher quality of life, they also considered it isolated, boring and inconvenient. They advised that it is necessary to thoroughly set practical goals, formulate plans, understand the environment and the local residents, and prepare and find requirements that can be addressed with a realistic view of life in a farming village.

In addition to the experience of settling in farm villages, this study surveyed aspects of the activities of women who moved to farm villages and participated in various activities, including educational, cultural, economic and group activities, as well as their policy-related demands.

While women who have turned to farming or returned to home villages need to be informed and educated, they also teach and educate others. Relevant training provided prior to moving is very important to women. Some pointed out the need for “some training courses

provided before moving need to focus on women” and “understanding of rural communities” and that integrated training and separate training should be provided in parallel. In addition, some rural communities offer training for local residents, women who have turned to farming or returned to home villages, and children from cities.

Women who have turned to farming or returned to their home villages forge cultural spaces to meet the demands of rural communities and engage in relevant activities. A lack of cultural spaces in farming villages is one of the greatest difficulties facing women moving from cities to farming villages because it is difficult to mingle with their peer group and have get-togethers, compounding their loneliness. Even small cultural spaces are highly beneficial to them and can be used by them to overcome isolation and difficulties. Some of them are pushing ahead with projects to create cultural spaces and engaging in relevant activities.

Many women who have turned to farming or returned to home villages have faced economic difficulties in their farming villages. Since it is challenging to make ends meet only through farming, they wish to engage in jobs other than farming; there are some temporary jobs in the education, welfare and administrative sections of rural communities. There are also many types of jobs at such villages that women can do; they find jobs through “acquaintances” or “personal connections.” They look for rewarding jobs that can benefit their rural communities and that will allow them to display their talents and ability. They also exert other efforts, including taking lifelong education courses to find work and obtain certifications. Some women who have turned to farming or returned to their home villages show a keen interest in starting a food processing or lodging business. Although they can handle the processing of agricultural products, finding markets for them is quite difficult because there are few specialized institutions that can provide support for women and it is hard to acquire the required information.

Women who have turned to farming or returned to home villages engage in village development activities ways including participating in the management of experiential village programs and serving as village managers or secretaries. They contribute to villages by providing techniques, knowledge and networks, which farming villages lack, for the management of an experiential village. In addition they “develop experiential programs in which women can participate” such as consumer and producer collaboration projects and food experience programs, playing needed roles in villages and expanding their participation in village affairs.

It has been revealed that participation in group activities is very helpful for women who have turned to farming or returned to home villages to settle themselves in farm villages. They gather at female farmer centers or female farmer associations to gain information and training, and sometimes to obtain work. They collect at women’s organizations of farming villages to share their concerns and find solutions, as well as to develop their capabilities. Such organizations are functioning as places where “women can earn something” and “female farmers can find solutions to their difficulties.”

Officials from institutions providing support for people turning to farming or returning to home villages propose, in order to help women turning to farming or returning to home

villages to successfully settle down, that couple training, family training, female training, training for finding jobs and starting businesses, mentoring, support for projects in which women participate, information service, farming village female organizations' projects supporting women moving to such villages, revitalization of intermediate organizations for women moving to farming villages, and programs to publicize successful cases, all should be provided.

Public municipal officials in charge of projects to attract urban residents to farming villages reported that women moving to such villages face a lack of income and employment, conflicts with local residents, spousal conflicts caused by an increased dependence on the husband, loneliness, lack of child-rearing facilities and inconvenient living environments. They proposed that in order to assuage these problems and help women moving to farms settle successfully, it is necessary to create jobs for women, provide support for starting business, offer programs for harmonization with local residents, encourage them to join female associations and engage in activities, encourage them to move with their families, provide support for their family to settle down, encourage gatherings of women moving to farming villages, and provide training support alongside child-rearing and educational assistance.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the preceding analysis, this study proposes certain required policies aimed at offering support to these women as they settle in farming villages and participate in society. We realized in carrying out the surveys that there have been changes in rural communities— whether small or large— in regions where many urban residents have moved to turn to farming or return to home villages. In many cases, people who turned to farming or returned to their home villages have played a role in the revitalization of the economic base in farming villages, cultural and educational activities and village development activities, and women who turned to farming or returned to their home villages were demonstrating their talents while participating in various economic and social activities. Although some voiced concerns about the excessive support provided by municipalities for people turning to farming or returning to home villages, as well as about the harm to community-based agricultural culture, since the number of people moving to farming villages is expected to be on the rise for a considerable time it is necessary to reinforce the positive aspects of turning to farming or returning to home villages and mitigate any negative impacts. In particular, since the attention and support of the government and municipalities have been directed toward men, despite the fact that many women are moving to farming villages, it is necessary to swiftly rectify this situation. It is also important to design policies to address the difficulties facing women and to allow rural communities to more fully utilize their talent. To this end, it is absolutely necessary to develop a range of women-oriented policies and incorporate them into existing androcentric comprehensive policies on turning to farming and returning to home villages. It is also necessary to include more policies aimed at supporting

women moving to farming villages in the “Basic Female Farmer Plans.”

Above all, in order to help women settle with greater facility, it is necessary to strengthen policies aimed at improving the rights, status and living standards of women living in farming villages. It is also necessary to strengthen the ownership and management rights of women as farmers, thus improving their access to financial services and securing decision-making and educational rights at levels comparable to those of men, as well as strengthening the education, culture and welfare services available in farming villages.

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