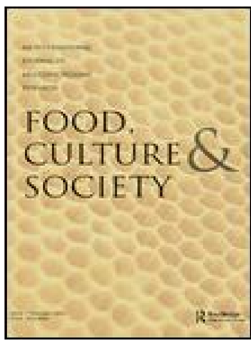

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# Women's food work, food citizenship, & transnational consumer capitalism: a case study of a feminist food cooperative in South Korea

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**ABSTRACT**

This article joins studies of food citizenship and feminist food studies to examine complex ways in which women's food work as domestic carework is connected to food citizenship in the context of transnational consumer capitalism. It defines food citizenship as practices of rights and responsibilities tied to food consumption. Specifically, drawing upon qualitative research spanning over a decade, it focuses on a feminist food cooperative (coop) in South Korea which experimented with food consumption as a vehicle for broader social change. Reflecting the mainstreaming of alternative food movements in the global North, this study contributes to feminist critique of the discourse of food citizenship in three ways. First, women's food work, as a key feature of the gendered social organization of food production and consumption, does not automatically lead to food citizenship in the context of transnational capitalism; its development necessitates tapping on women's desire for broader social recognition and connection. Second, a potential for women's food citizenship is caught between the capitalism that is deeply fragmenting and individualizing and the coop's goal of promoting local and deterritorialized solidarity. Finally, the study highlights the centrality of larger social and political contexts to the transformation of consumption.

**KEYWORDS**
Women's food work; carework; food citizenship; transnational consumer capitalism; sustainable food movements; food coop in South Korea

We live in a globalized world where the production and consumption of food have become a dire problem. While food continues to be the source of pleasure and nourishment for our corporeal, social and spiritual existence, its industrialized production and consumption have ironically undermined the health and wellbeing of numerous individuals, social groups, and the environment. In response, various forms of commercial practices and social movements have developed to deal with the problems of industrialized food. What is noteworthy about this development is the mainstreaming of food politics, involving a large number of mostly middle-class consumers in "developed" countries. Formerly food problems were associated with "underdeveloped" countries dealing with hunger, malnutrition, and exploitation of food producers. The mainstreaming is well reflected in the global spread of ethical or political consumption, as well as the explosive growth of "organic" or "local" food marketing and consumption. These

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phenomena raise a question as to how far and deep food consumption can be channeled into civic orientation that builds and maintains communities beyond commercial transactions.

This article joins studies of food citizenship and feminist food studies to explore this question. Food citizenship is defined as practices of rights and responsibilities tied to food consumption. Specifically, a case study of a feminist food cooperative (coop) in South Korea examines the connection between women's food work and food citizenship in the context of transnational consumer capitalism. The feminist food coop illuminates the neglected commonplace that women in various societies represent a majority of consumers who use food networks alternative to the industrialized system of food production, distribution, and consumption. To contextualize the case study, I discuss the theoretical and empirical discourses of food citizenship and indicate the glaring absence of gender, class, race/ethnicity in this literature. Drawing upon feminist food studies, I discuss the importance of the intersectionality of these categories of social hierarchy in studying global food movements. Particularly, I pay attention to the connection between women's food work, consumption, and civic agency. Then, I convey a concise history of the Korean feminist food coop that existed between 1989 and 2013 as an integral component of the women's organization People's Friends Society (PFS). I discuss the profile of coop members, focusing on lay members, to address their class background. My main section analyzes complex ways in which women's food work as unpaid carework is connected to food citizenship and disconnected from it in the context of the coop movement embedded in transnational consumer capitalism. Finally, I draw theoretical and empirical lessons from this case study to deepen and expand our understanding of food citizenship.

I present a three-pronged argument that women's food citizenship is caught between the individualizing force of transnational consumer capitalism and the modifying force of the coop promoting local and de-territorialized solidarity. First, although women's food citizenship is tied to their role as family caretakers, it gets realized through moving beyond that role. Specifically, my interviewees became active coop members because such membership satisfied their desire for extending their social relations and activities beyond the family. Second, women's food citizenship, developing in the context of intensifying their food work and unequal access to healthy and safe food, has a class implication; this combination makes food citizenship based on consumption largely a middle-class practice that requires additional time and money to look for such food. This intensification of food work both enables and constrains women's food citizenship. Third, the current era of recurring financial crises (1997 and 2008) led to pervasive job insecurity and income instability such that even middle-class housewives feel pressured to find paid work or to at least increase their investment in their children's education and future employment. This economic and social condition largely constrains the cultivation of women's food citizenship.

## Methodology

My analysis is based on a series of field research covering the period during which the PFS coop stores multiplied and declined in the process of pursuing ideals of the feminist movement in the context of consumer capitalist society. Initial fieldwork occurred

between August 2004 and May 2005; the second round during summer of 2015. Supplementary research was conducted in the fall of 2009 and in July 2019. I collected in-depth interviews with lay members, staff, and officers of PFS local branches in the Greater Seoul area and provincial cities and the main headquarters in Seoul. I met these women through informal referrals or on-site meetings after I visited the PDF coop stores and offices to explain my research. I interviewed them in various sites, including coop stores, offices, adjacent cafes and restaurants, and their houses. I asked them semi-structured but open-ended questions about their lives with a focus on their involvement in the PFS and its coop. All interviews were conducted by myself in Korean and recorded with their consent and later transcribed. Altogether I interviewed 61 members, but for this article, I used interviews with 52 members of three local branches with coop stores (see Table A1). Several people were interviewed twice or multiple times over a decade. I conducted participant observation of members' small group meetings, street campaigns, coop activities, committee meetings, annual and monthly organizational meetings. I also collected materials published by the branches and headquarters, including newsletters, house organs, and proceedings of their workshops and meetings.

My positionality as an expatriate scholar from the U.S. was largely positive in getting assistance for the long-term qualitative research, enabling my access to the interviewees, coop activities and events, and organizational resources. The interviewees became open about sharing their experiences as I shared my own life experience as an insider/outsider, immigrant, and feminist scholar. I was able to establish rapport with them through repeated meetings and interactions over meals and through other activities.

## Disembodied generic consumers in studies of food citizenship

With the mainstreaming of food politics in the global North, studies of alternative food movements have grown since the 2000s and specifically the discourse of food citizenship has developed. Building upon practices of ethical or political consumption, the discourse of food citizenship has evolved from "citizen consumers" or "consumer citizenship" tied to the movements promoting Fair Trade goods and sustainable goods (Ricci, Marinelli, and Puliti 2016; Kaplan 2010; Lockie 2009; Seyfang 2006; Goodman 2004). As a specific expression of consumer citizenship, food citizenship refers to practices of rights and responsibilities tied to food consumption.

In theoretical studies, food citizenship promotes the basic right to gain access to healthy, safe food, and responsibility for the health and safety of other human beings (such as farm producers and workers in the food processing industry), animals, and the environment. It elaborates on social and political dimensions of food consumption by linking it to moral rights and ethical responsibilities for not only oneself but also for others as contemporaries and for future generations. While the initial conceptualization of citizenship was bound to a nation-state, food citizenship in the 21st century is well informed with transnational perspectives. This concept encourages active engagement with local communities and fosters a deterritorialized ethic of care in the face of environmental destruction that threatens our collective survival (Lozano-Cabedo and Gomez-Benito 2017; Gomez-Benito and Lozano 2014; Renting, Schermer, and Rossi 2012; Tavernier 2012). In so doing, food citizenship redefines consumption as more than merely economic activities and individual choices and restores the social and political

dimensions obscured by transnational capitalism. This holistic orientation blurs the boundary between the market and civil society and conveys the hope and wish for the transformation of the capitalist world order by re-envisioning consumption.

Empirical studies of food citizenship focus on people involved in developing and using alternative networks of food production, distribution, and consumption in specific local contexts (Öz and Aksoy 2019; Pétursson 2018; Sacchi 2018; Schrank 2018; Preiss, Charao-Marques, and Wiskerke 2017; Mestres and Lien 2017; Dubisson-Quellier, Lamine, and Le Velly 2011). The geographical scope of these studies is global, including countries in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. They explore old and new forms of alternative food networks, encompassing consumer coops, solidarity buying groups of local and organic food, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and collective urban gardening initiatives. These studies show why individuals volunteer to participate in building and maintaining such networks and how they strengthen social solidarity and a sense of community through face-to-face interactions, emotional engagements, and reflexive practices of consumption. Despite its valuable contribution to global food politics, however, theoretical and empirical studies of food citizenship are largely devoid of an intersectional analysis of gender, class, and race/ethnicity in their treatment of people as generic individuals or unmarked consumers (Smith 2019; Mares 2012).

## Feminist food studies and global histories of women's consumer activism

The growing body of feminist food studies fills this lacuna by paying attention to the intersectionality of gender, class, and race/ethnicity with a focus on the salience of women's work in the production and consumption of food (Britton and Price 2014; Cooley 2015; Halloran 2015; Sachs and Patel-Campillo 2014; Williams-Forson and Cognard-Black 2014; Allen and Sacks 2012; Mares 2012). As Patricia Allen and Carolyn Sachs argue, the production and consumption of food are organized along the line of gender in most societies. They offer a framework for analyzing gendered social relations of food composed of the "material domain" of production in the formal labor market, the "sociocultural domain" of unpaid reproductive labor in the home and family, and the "corporeal domain" of emotional and physical connections to food and eating. Food citizenship as an embodied practice, they imply, is profoundly linked to women's enduring responsibility for taking care of their families, especially children. The social change characterized by women's increasing access to higher education and their growing entry into full-time employment has not decoupled them from the carework performed in the private or domestic sphere. Instead, the internal hierarchy among women across class, race, and immigration statuses in the world replaced the unpaid carework with commodified carework, which is still predominantly performed by the marginalized women as domestic workers or service workers (Parreñas 2015; Bauer and Ramirez 2010). These marginalized women also work in the retail food industry providing ready-made food for middle-class women working outside the home and needing to reduce their unpaid food work at home. Given the enduring centrality of women to unpaid and paid food work, it is necessary to examine how this feminized labor figures in the development of women's agency in alternative food movements in the world.

This inquiry can benefit from global histories documenting the significance of consumption in developing women's (political) citizenship. When women were not allowed to vote in the West, they used their position as consumers to exercise their political power. In the nineteenth-century Britain, women participated in boycotting goods produced by slave labor in the context of the abolitionist movement (Sussman 2000). During the Progressive era, American women often led consumer activist associations sponsored by the government and fought for fair prices of goods and "living" wages for workers (Jubas 2007, 238, 239). During the mid-twentieth century, women in postwar Europe and Japan used consumer activism to save resources and reduce commodified leisure in favor of shorter work hours (Garon and Maclachlan 2006). In South Korea, where women were given suffrage as a trapping of political modernity from the beginning, their socially sanctioned identity as mothers/wives enabled their participation in the consumer movement as one of a few opportunities for practicing civil rights (Moon 2002). The developmental state also mobilized women to be nationalistic consumers by saving resources and buying Korean products (Moon 2005, Ch 3; Nelson 2000). These histories teach us the extent to which middle-class women were able to use their positions as consumers and were allowed to do so in the broader contexts of a social movement or political mobilization. They sensitize us to the importance of the broader social and political context of women's food citizenship in our time.

I turn to the development of modern coop movements, a constructive response to the negative consequences of industrial capitalism. These movements deserve attention because they generated alternative space for restoring the social and political dimensions of economic activities that resonates with the current discourse of food citizenship and practices of building sustainable and just food systems. The beginning of the modern coop is commonly credited to the Rochdale Pioneers in England, who were exposed to the destructive social upheaval of the Industrial Revolution (Zeuli and Cropp 2004, chapter 2). Politicized working-class women formed the Women's Co-operative Guilds to assert their rights. Coops, despite their evolution and variations, contrast with capitalist businesses primarily by centering on satisfying the shared needs of its member-owners, whether providing quality products and services or building and maintaining a community (Altman 2010). While not immune to inequalities in social relations, a coop is a constructive model for combining economic activities with democratic self-rule and collaboration. Studying coops as a product of activism and incubator of civic agency can deepen our understanding of the connection between women's food work and food citizenship beyond the individualistic consumer agency.

## The PFS food coop: history, local branches, and profile of its members

A few food coops emerged in urban South Korea in the late 1980s. Stemming from the farmers' organic agriculture movement of the 1970s, which developed in critical response to the government-imposed Green Revolution, these coops focused on the direct supply of organic rice and produce to their members. Their growth was facilitated by the passage of the Cooperatives Law in 1999 (Cheong 2009, 58, 59). When PFS formed its food coop network in 1989, it was one of the first-generation coops and the only feminist coop in South Korea. The PFS itself was formed in 1987 when democratization movements against the military dictatorship (under Chun Doo Hwan's rule) became active and

widespread. As one of the oldest feminist organizations, PFS differentiated itself from other women's organizations by consciously identifying with the social change from a feminist perspective. Its headquarters were located in Seoul as local branches were established in Seoul, Gyeonggi Province, and other provincial cities throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. Early on, the founding members of PFS embraced the food coop as a vehicle for fostering a "grassroots women's movement" by reaching out to "women who were not highly educated elites" (PFS 2004, 8). The headquarters and three large branches in the greater Seoul area established and expanded their coop stores but most provincial branches could not (with the exception of Chinju branch in the mid-2000s). These coop stores multiplied during the 2000s and their total number in 2011 reached five in the headquarters, five in the Southwestern Seoul (SW) branch, four in Northeastern Seoul (NE) branch, and four in the Gyeonggi Province (KG) branch. These 18 coop stores existed as integral components of PFS until 2012 when the individual coops began becoming independent entities.

PFS had three categories of membership: "life-time members" who paid at least one million *won* (Korean currency) for one-time membership dues, "full members" who paid membership dues for both the coop and the PFS, and "general members" who paid membership dues for the coop only. The distinction between these two categories was rather ambiguous because the coop was an integral part of PFS, but in membership practices, the coop was separate from PFS. This distinction reflects, as argued below, the enduring tension between the normative goal of the coop to promote grassroot activism in women to change their own local communities and the reality of transnational consumer capitalism promoting individual solutions through consumption. All of the three branches had far more coop-only members than full members who participated in activities beyond merely using coop stores.

Given the different demographic compositions of the three major local branches in the greater Seoul area, the relative importance of the coop membership to the PFS membership varied. The SW branch relied more heavily on coop membership for its activities and growth than the NE and KG branches. The SW branch was located in a historically new residential area developed by the (national) government to accommodate an exploding population growth in Seoul.[1] As a showcase of a large-scale urban development, during the 1980s the area witnessed the rapid construction of numerous apartment complexes along with parks with trees. In association with this green space, which has been a rare resource in Seoul, the development of competitive primary and secondary schools increased housing prices in the area. Commonly known as the second Kangnam (south of the Han River), families living in this area have been known for their strong aspiration for upward mobility and moving into the most affluent Kangnam area. Aspiring middle-class housewives in the area invested fiercely in their children's education and in enhancing their social status. Hence, most of SW coop members were interested in consuming organic food but not interested in activism for social change. This was reflected in difficulties faced by its activists in recruiting more coop members into participation beyond food purchases. In comparison, the NE branch was located in an old and northernmost area of Seoul where the cost of living was lower and a sizable portion of residents had local roots in the area and its vicinities. The combination of lower cost of living and two famous mountains attracted people of various educational levels with lower incomes. Established by activists of the democratization movement in the late

1980s, this branch was considered (by PFS staff and officers) as one of the most active branches in terms of civic activism beyond food consumption. The KG branch was located in a provincial city adjacent to Seoul and was founded by a group of activists who moved from the NE branch when the city was newly constructed to disperse the bursting population in Seoul. Hence, it kept the activist orientation in its culture.

Based on the demographic survey I conducted with 52 interviewees, these women can be categorized largely as middle class. While the headquarters had more single women who were gainfully employed and in their late twenties and thirties, the branches had mostly married women in their thirties and forties who had children. Measured in terms of their own education and occupation (before they quit their jobs), their spouses' education and occupation, and family income, a quarter of them were upper-middle class with postgraduate education and professional jobs for themselves and/or their husbands and the remaining majority were middle or lower-middle class with college or high-school educations and white-collar jobs or self employment for themselves and/or their husbands. All of them identified themselves loosely with the middle class, suggesting the normalization of this class position in urban South Korea.

## Women's food citizenship in PFS coop

### *Developing food citizenship through going beyond women's food work*

PFS food coop shows the centrality of women's normative role/identity as family caretakers to the development of their food citizenship but with a twist. Somewhat paradoxically, founding members of PFS viewed the transformative potential of this identity by addressing women's "practical gender interest" in feeding their families (Molyneux 1985). The founding members envisioned housewives and single women as agents of social change, beginning with using the coop for practical reasons, gradually getting involved in various aspects of running it, and finally participating in social issues beyond food purchases. While conducting fieldwork in 2004 and 2005, it was evident that PFS branches considered the coop as the vehicle for a localized grassroot women's movement and thus focused both on how to increase coop membership and on turning coop members into full members. The coop was a real-life example of an organization tapping into the potential for women's food citizenship. Specifically, it recasts housewives commonly considered reproducers of the patriarchal gender division of labor and "victims to be rescued" as potential agents of positive social change (Kim 2009, 10).

How are the coop's ideal vision and transformative efforts inflected by class and gender in the context of transnational consumer capitalism? Despite the rapid economic, political, and social change in Korean society, women continue to function as the primary caretakers of their families. In particular, the middle-class housewives PFS sought out to popularize its feminist movement are almost entirely responsible for purchasing and preparing food. Given the feminized nature of food work, women dominated the coop membership. The feminization of food shopping contrasts with certain Muslim societies where men as husbands or fathers go to markets for food shopping given the tradition of women's seclusion (Naguib 2015). Prior to rapid urbanization and social change, a similar practice existed in Korea as part of the neo-

Confucian tradition of women's seclusion (among high social status groups). There were some men who were full members of PFS and also coop members. They turned out to be either supportive husbands of active full members or activist men who supported various social movement organizations by becoming members. Yet I rarely encountered men shopping for food in the coop stores during my fieldworks over a decade.

The connection between women's food work and food citizenship in the context of PFS coop is circuitous rather than straightforward. On one hand, as the coop founders expected, the seemingly apolitical and mundane issues of food consumption enabled its initial access to conservative and/or affluent women not interested in feminist social change. On the other hand, coop membership did not automatically lead to food citizenship in the context of transnational consumer capitalism. My in-depth interviews with the coop members revealed that their desire for meaningful social activities and relations apart from their domestic role as caretakers motivated them to join the coop and become active in the PFS. These women found the caretaker role necessary but engulfing, isolating, and depressing. It is a minority of my interviewees who accepted this gendered role without strong reservation. The following remarks by a lower-middle class housewife convey the complexity involved in the connection between women's role as family caretaker and their food citizenship.

> I bought vegetables and other food in the coop store in my neighborhood. My son was suffering from atopic dermatitis and I heard that he should eat organic food. When I became a regular, one of the store staff asked me if I want to volunteer there. I accepted her suggestion and worked there 2 hours every morning. I enjoyed it because *I disliked staying home*. It's *isolating* and *depressing*. I persuaded many neighbors to join the coop and received a "dandelion award." ... Now I am working 5 hour per day at the store. (WHY, late 30s, SW branch, interviewed on 3/19/2005; emphasis added)[2]

As a high school graduate, she is an exception among my interviewees, who are mostly college educated.[3] But her motivation for joining the coop is common among my interviewees. Like most of my interviewees, she worked before childbirth (as a salesperson for a small company supplying clothing materials) and found motherhood isolating and draining. The coop provided her with a rare social space to realize her nondomestic desires and develop an identity beyond her familial role. Food citizenship cultivated through her participation in the coop is an expression of her individual self, tied to food work but not reducible to it and beyond the role of family caretaker.

### Intensification of women's food work and middle-class dominance of food citizenship

Women's search for healthy organic food conveyed above illuminates the shifting context of women's food work, which made women feel personal and social pressure to find safe, healthy food. This highlights the ironic intensification of women's food work despite the ubiquity of ready-made food and convenience shopping that ongoing commercialization in Korean society has generated. While women continued to perform their food work at home willingly or reluctantly, the broader social context of this unpaid reproductive

labor in globalizing South Korea shifted especially in the aftermath of Asian financial crisis (1997–98).

To cope with this crisis, the Korean government accepted the neoliberal structural adjustment measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), including the acceptance of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) regime. This change completely opened the domestic agricultural market, even for the staple of rice. The FTA also accelerated the transnational circulation of industrially produced food, aggravating the problems of food safety and health. Since the 1990s, Korean consumers have experienced local outbreaks of food contamination and global outbreaks of mad cow disease and avian flu as threats to public health. By the 2000s, Koreans had undergone a drastic change in dietary practices, marked by the rising consumption of meat, refined carbohydrates, and unhealthy fat. This change led to escalating problems of diet-related illness and obesity (KBCEG 2006, 29; *Oh My News* 10/22/2005). Hence, the issues of food safety and health affected many people viscerally. The production of environmentally friendly agricultural products increased tenfold between 2000 and 2003 when a "well-being trend" spread (*Hangyoreh Newspaper* 6/15/2004). Middle-class mothers, or those who aspire to be middle-class, have paid increasing attention to finding "organic" (*yuginong*) or "environmentally friendly" (*ch'inhwangyeong*) food. Higher prices of safe, healthy food and uneven access to such carry implications for social class in the intensification of women's food work. Echoing middle-class Canadian mothers performing extensive emotional and physical labor to find safe, healthy food for their children (Cairns, Johnston, and Mackendrick 2013), a majority of PFS coop members were concerned with how to find such food. Prior to joining the coop, some of them used an alternative food network available to them. This popular concern among mothers is captured by the following remarks.

> Getting married and raising children, I became naturally concerned about food problems. I began to order organic food for some time and then one day I ran into one of my college friends in my apartment complex. She was a member of the coop. So I joined it. (KHA, mid 40s, NE branch, interviewed on 11/22/2004)

> Raising two children, I've been very interested in food issues. So I started using the coop network in the neighborhood and came to understand its membership and goal. I joined and got involved more and more because there weren't many people around to keep this network going. (WYK, late 30s, KG branch, interviewed on 3/14/2005)

Despite differences in their intraclass background, these two women share concerns about safe, healthy food for their children and made efforts to find such food by searching for an alternative food network. While KHA and her husband are graduates of an elite university and she came from an affluent family, WYK is a high school graduate and came from a poor family. KHA describes herself "progressive," secular, and lived in Seoul at the time of the interview, whereas WKS describes herself "conservative," Christian, and lived in a provincial city. The maternal concern for safe, healthy food is echoed by a coop member interviewed a decade later. Recollecting her intensive mothering, KSH states,

> I gave birth to two boys one after another. When they were young, the most important thing in my childrearing was to get healthy food. After that to find a safe space for them to play. Back then, there was no space for children to play in the Children's House run by the local government. (late 40s, NE branch, interviewed on 7/15/2015)

### *Cultivating women's food citizenship and practicing transclass solidarity locally and transnationally*

Throughout the 2000s, the number of PFS coop members and stores multiplied. The coop had 220 founding members in 1989 and over 20,000 members by 2009. An important factor contributing to this growth was the rise of the well-being trend in the early 2000s (PFS 2009). This was a period when Koreans were recovering from the traumatic Asian financial crisis (1997–98). Although this trend commercialized well-being by reducing it to the consumption of a wide range of commodities presumably promoting it, it also reflected widespread and earnest soul-searching among Koreans, who had acclimatized to the rising standards of living in the context of rapid economic development. Yet the trend was a double-edged sword that simultaneously generated opportunities for developing women's food citizenship while undermining possible membership in the coop.

The growth of coop membership and stores cultivated the potential to turn commodified food consumption into civic activism for social change. Foremost, in the context of transnational consumer capitalism, the coop redefined food as "materials for living" (*saengwhaljae*) rather than as commercial goods (*sangp'um*) to be sold and bought for profit. The redefinition stressed the utility of food rather than its exchange value. In 2004, when the first FTA in South Korea became effective, the coop called rice, soybean products, and dairy products "materials for living that change the world." Resisting the logic of the WTO regime, which was undermining food sovereignty and safety, the coop launched special campaigns for both adults and children, including how to cultivate organic rice as a symbol of Korean food (*Together* 2004, March/April, 26–27, 46) and how to make tofu with locally grown and non-GMO soybeans as an element of healthy-eating education.

Active coop members practiced alternative social relations in supplying and using the materials for living. In particular, rice consumption signified support for local farmers as it had been the staple of the Korean diet. The coop carried out a campaign for living with coop rice for 1 year and promoted various products made from local rice, ranging from breads and noodles to liquor (*Together* 2005, May/June, 46). Soybeans are the main ingredient for making traditional fermented products, soy sauce (*kanjang*), and soy paste (*toenjang*), essential to Korean cuisine, and popular items like tofu and soy milk. These food items came under assault by the ubiquity of GM soybeans, aggressively marketed by multinational and domestic food companies. Korean consumers encountered the massive import of dairy products from cows fed with GM corn and soybeans (*Together* 2004, Nov./Dec., 49). Active coop members met with organic dairy farmers and organized events to cook and taste dishes made with such meat (*Together* 2005, March/April, 8). These activities were oriented toward the underlying goal of building alternative social interactions and relationships between producers and coop members to transform local communities through participation and cooperation (*Together* 2004, Sept./Oct., 8).

Affirming its feminist identity, coop members made efforts to find women farmers as their suppliers. They were responding to the common division of female coop members and male producers and the dominance of men in the leadership of other food coops (Kim 2009, 10, 14). The coop members also recognized wives of farming families by using their names along with their husbands' when they listed producers on coop goods. These

practices intended to challenge the invisibility of women as agricultural producers and commonly hidden as unpaid family workers. This was particularly significant given that organic farming required far more intensive manual labor to avoid the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Starting in 2003, coop members visited women farmers in their regular field trips to production sites to build solidarity and social connections (Kim 2009, 14). The following remarks convey the significance of these connections to women's food citizenship.

> A PFS coop store opened in my neighborhood and I began to use it. I met there a couple of my college friends and they asked me to join the coop. So I became involved; I monitored materials for living, got training at the headquarters, worked in various committees. What I liked most about working at the coop store was *fieldtrips to production sites and meet farmers in person*. These activities were *a good break for me*. I am an accommodating type, going along with what others want. I've been like that with my husband. I was quite stressed out from marital life and without realizing I was venting out my stress to my oldest child. Later, I had a play therapy with my child. (MJA, SW branch, late 30s; interviewed on 3/19/2005; emphases added.)

Her description of her personality is somewhat unexpected because she used to be a student activist involved in organizing and supporting the factory workers' movement in the late 1980s. She married a fellow student activist but their marriage was still structured by the conventional gender division of labor. When she was struggling as a mother of young children without social support, her activities in the coop allowed her to extend her social relations and connect to farmers. This shows one possibility for building solidarity between urban consumers and rural producers. Her narrative also harks back to my earlier point: women's food citizenship grows from their desire to move beyond the confining gender role as family caretaker.

Building collaborative social relations with producers becomes transnational in the context of increasing globalization of food production and circulation. In 2006, responding to member demands, the coop included imported food products that could not be produced locally, such as coffee and sugar. In such cases, it embraced the practice of using "fair trade" goods. By 2009, it sold coffee from Columbia purchased directly from local producers, Mascobado sugar (produced by an indigenous brown sugar-manufacturing method) from the Philippines, olive oil from Palestine, and chocolate from Columbia produced without child labor and imported directly from its producers. While global fair trade was far from a perfect solution for commodified human relations generated by transnational consumer capitalism, in the absence of a better alternative, the coop accepted the practice of buying and selling these fair-trade products (*Together* 2009, May/June, 41).

The coop's growth improved financial resources active members could use to develop new programs and projects and strengthen existing ones with the goal of turning coop members into full members or at least raising their consciousness beyond merely purchasing safe, healthy food for their families. These efforts ranged from "a day to meet coop members," "coop informational meetings," and regular coop committee meetings to organizing field trips to farming sites and meeting local producers. Through these activities, some housewives became activists and then officers of local coop boards. In fact, a majority of the coop leaders were housewives. This positive transformation conveys the brightest picture of women's food citizenship cultivated in

the context of the coop movement. While this group of women were a numerical minority, their transformation illuminates an extent to which an alternative space like the coop can work in capitalist society. A majority of these active women had little previous experience of participation in social movement organizations and local politics but became activists by channeling their personal desires and needs for broader social and political engagements and recognition outside their families through the movement. Proximity of coop stores to their residences increased accessibility, which also increased interactions among lay members and staff, and helped build enduring social relations. In food consumption, they came to see the connection between their kitchen and the global economy and politics. As a coop member mentioned, “When we purchase bean sprouts here, we are not just thinking about our families’ health, but we are also thinking about how to build a local movement to change this society” (*Together* 2004, May/June, 29). As noted, this remark highlights how women’s food work serves as an entry point for recognizing their desire to expand social relations and activities beyond their domestic role or identity.

### *The underlying tension between food citizenship and the individualizing force of transnational consumer capitalism*

There is nonetheless a persistent gap between the numerical growth of coop members and the qualitative growth in food citizenship among coop members. It was a minority of coop members who became active “full members” of PFS and participated in various activities addressing broader social issues from a feminist perspective. Even among full members, many were members who paid dues but got involved only occasionally because of preoccupations with their commitments to family and work. As staff and lay members whom I interviewed observed regarding their coop stores, a majority of women who joined the coop did not intend to go beyond purchasing environmentally friendly or organic food for their family members.[4] Disinterest in getting actively involved in running the coop and other PFS activities beyond food consumption need not be reduced to thoughtless indifference or individual failure to exercise their food citizenship. This majority attitude reflects the dominant subjectivity promoted by consumer capitalist society; women are encouraged to see themselves as individual consumers who can satisfy their needs and solve their problems by buying commodified goods and services. As money is so critical to ensuring their personal choices, many people, including middle-class housewives, are supremely interested in making money rather than engaging in other types of activities, such as civic participation and community building.

The preoccupation with making money necessitated by consumer capitalist society undermines the coop’s potential for cultivating women’s food citizenship. The accelerated movement of transnational capital in the name of flexibility affected branch coop members, who were largely middle-class housewives. Prior to the 2008 global financial crisis, the ongoing neoliberal restructuring in the aftermath of the IMF crisis pressured this category of women to look for paid employment to compensate for decreasing household incomes vis-à-vis rising costs of living and, particularly, children’s educational expenses. Responding to my question about her involvement in the PFS/coop, a member of the KG branch describes this reality.

> I was away from it [PFS/coop] for 4 years because I had to make money. One cannot do a thing without money. Even PFS cannot do its good work without money. I was earning money to pay my children's *hakwonbi* [cost of lessons at commercial academies] and our living expenses. But I had to quit again because I have to take care of my children. I cannot ask my husband to quit his job and take care of children. That is not possible in our reality yet . . . . I was uneasy about staying home and focusing on children and my heart was aching. I returned [to PFS/coop] like a woman who goes back to her natal family. (CMI, early 40s, interviewed on 4/11/2005)

Many other coop members who could not find paid employment tried to obtain licenses or certificates useful for it later on. Hence, they were keenly interested in programs and projects that gave them such opportunities but this common interest is at odds with the PFS interest in turning them into grassroot activists. This keen interest also echoes a larger trend in Korean society shaped by neoliberal capitalism, namely, the strategy of individualizing and branding for survival (Song 2009); the individual learns how to accumulate credentials and sell herself to a highest bidder. This need for paid employment was further accentuated by the conservative administration (under Lee Myong Bak; r. 2008–12), which actively promoted neoliberal economic and political restructuring. During my fieldwork in 2009, I was often told about the increasing difficulty of finding housewives available for volunteer activities in the coop because many of them were busy taking classes that would help them find paid employment and/or support their children's education, a social arena which had become even more fiercely competitive. A lay member and later officer who was involved in the PFS for 15 years in the KG branch observe the negative impact of the economic crisis on middle-class families.

> For some time, it became difficult to hold a meeting in a member's house. They [members] were taking turns but each host became increasingly stressed out. Another thing I noted was everyone became so busy since the economic crisis about 4 or 5 years ago. One has to get some sort of license or temporary job paid by hours because the husband's income alone cannot feed a family of four anymore. In addition, many regular jobs were turned into irregular jobs and people's income became unstable. (YJA, early 50s, interviewed on 7/22/2015)

These comments underscore the conflict between the coop's ideal of transforming women into activists and the reality of consumer capitalist society exhorting individual buying power.

The growing popularity of organic or environmentally friendly food among Korean consumers has expanded the commercial market for it since the 2000s. In 2020, supermarkets and grocery stores of various sizes commonly sell such food in urban Korea. The rapid proliferation of commercial stores seriously undermined the viability of the PFS coop. Without reaching and maintaining a large-scale and professionalized distribution system, the food coop could not survive. In association with the economic restructuring undermining employment security, this commercial development amplified the conflict between the ideal of the feminist coop and the reality of consumer capitalist society. Its unique and valuable identity as a feminist social movement organization became more of a constraining condition in the fiercely competitive market for healthy and safe food. In 2009 and 2010, the coop renamed itself "happiness-focus food coop" to reestablish its identity and cope with the problem of growing financial difficulty and sustainability. Some coop stores had to close and were absorbed

into other stores (*Together* 2011 July/August, 42–43). In spring of 2012, the PFS general meeting decided to separate the coops from the parent organization. The coop stores under the headquarters and SW branch coop became independent of PFS, and other branch coops followed suit (*Together* 2012 May/June, 42). The following remark by the PFS head captures how the coop's internal conditions shifted over time.

> For 23 years, coop activities took place under the rubric of the women's movement organization. Hence the coop was able to develop women's leadership values and expand women's worldviews. On one hand, we have considered the coop as important space for our movement; we could grapple with environmental problems, food problems, and the alternative economic system from a feminist perspective. But during the coop's history for 23 years and the PFS's history for 25 years, our size and structure have grown and have become very complicated. It became very time-and-energy consuming to coordinate diverse and multiple actors and organizations. We have reached a point at which we have to separate the coop for its own autonomous development; it can use its own unique features to enhance its own movement capacity and influence grassroots women and men. (*Together* 2012 May/June, 42–43)

Since the organizational restructuring, however, the happiness-focus (HF) coop has been emphasizing its identity as a regular coop rather than that of a feminist movement for women to participate in. Its new name implies its attention to the quality of life standards, a topic which has drawn public attention since the 2000s after the widespread circulation of the comparative life satisfaction index compiled by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) of which membership was gained by South Korea in 1996. In these global comparisons, South Korea has been repeatedly below the average among OECD countries. The SW branch continued to use the coop network for social change. For example, it collaborated with the municipal government and successfully launched and expanded a composting program to create organic fertilizer from food wastes (YKR of KG branch, interviewed on 7/24/2015). While still linking women's food work to sustainable environmental practice, this trajectory seems to diminish the transformative potential of the feminist coop to move women's food citizenship beyond food work. When I interviewed the current head of the HF coop in July 2019, I realized that she was a lay member I had met in the NE branch over a decade ago. Although her presence may symbolize a continuity of the feminist orientation in the working of the coop, she noted this is no longer the primary focus.

## Conclusion

Drawing on my long-term qualitative research, this article used a case study of the feminist food coop in South Korea to explore the connection between food consumption and civic agency. It brings the intersectionality of gender and class (salient to the local context) into the discourse of food citizenship, which reflects the mainstreaming of alternative food movements in the global North but tends to represent actors of such movements as generic and disembodied consumers. Building on feminist food studies recognizing the intersectionality of social hierarchy with attention to gender, this study examined complex ways in which women's food work, a key feature of the gendered

social organization of food production and consumption, is connected to and disconnected from women's food citizenship in the context of transnational consumer capitalism. This analysis deepens and expands our understanding of the concept and practices of food citizenship in the following ways.

First, the analysis conveys a nuanced and complex connection between women's food work and food citizenship. Whether women carry out this unpaid work for their families willingly or reluctantly, this labor does not automatically lead to the development of food citizenship even in the context of the food coop. This citizenship promoting both local and de-territorialized solidarity beyond individual choices and consumption develops when women recognize and act on their desires to expand their social relations and activities beyond the role of domestic caretakers. While women's practical gender interest in feeding healthy, safe food to their families brings them to the coop, without moving beyond this interest, food consumption does not develop into food citizenship. In comparison with commercial food stores, the coop's identity as a social movement organization facilitates and enables some women to explore their nondomestic roles and identities. The ethics of care food citizenship implies is more an effect of the feminist coop as an organizational context nurturing noncapitalist social relations than the result of women's mothering work, including their food work for their families.

Second, the analysis shows how women's food citizenship is largely confined to middle-class women. As industrialized food production and consumption have expanded, the search for healthy, safe food demands more emotional and physical labor from women. This intensified food work requires additional time, information/knowledge, and money to find and use alternative food networks, which results in unequal access to organic and environmentally friendly food. In the society of mass consumption, intensified food work has become a symbolic marker of higher social status and goes beyond meeting practical needs (Johnston and Bauman 2015). This is not to argue that all aspects or expressions of food citizenship are middle-class practices; food citizenship focusing on women producers' rights and responsibilities encompasses working-class and lower-class women. The women I interviewed were exposed to opportunities to build such transclass solidarity locally and transnationally and to value their interactions with producers. This type of deliberate effort is necessary for food citizenship to mitigate its limit.

Third, my analysis delves into a fundamental question as to how far civic orientation can go in the context of consumer capitalism, which stresses profound individualization. It shows how women's potential for such civic agency is caught between the individualizing force of transnational consumer capitalism and the coop's goal of developing local and de-territorialized solidarity. The rise and decline of the PFS coop as a real-life experiment speaks volumes to the conflict between the ideal of a feminist coop promoting grassroots activism and solidarity for social change and the reality of consumer capitalism promoting individual solutions. This tension is not simply antagonistic but circuitous. On one hand, the popularity of commercial trends for well-being in the early 2000s increased the coop membership and thereby increased its potential for turning women into activists practicing food citizenship and a minority of women in the coop experienced this meaningful transformation. Yet, transnational consumer capitalism generated two major economic crises in a decade, which resulted in widespread employment insecurity and unstable income. This situation also pressured middle-class

mothers/housewives to invest fiercely in their children's education to enhance their employment prospects and thereby the reproduction of their social class or increased desire for upward social mobility. The combination of pervasive job insecurity, unstable income, and rising educational expenses heightens the fundamental need for money in capitalist society. This need for money has affected even middle-class housewives who were supposed to stay home and be provided for by their husbands. The housewives' strong desire for paid employment and their efforts to do so diminished their opportunities to get involved in the coop beyond buying food there.

The global histories of women's (political) citizenship and its connection to consumption discussed above is instructive. What is noteworthy is that various groups of women used consumption or their positions as consumers to promote their rights in the contexts of social movements or mobilizations by nation-states. It is not consumption as an individual choice but the larger political contexts that transform the act of consumption and identity of the consumer into a tool of political and social change. It remains to be seen how the transformation of the PFS coop into a regular food coop will cope with the tension between food consumption as an individual act and solution and as a tool of social change beyond it.

## Notes

1. As a small country (the size of Indiana State) with approximately 51 million people, population density in South Korea has been very high. In particular, the density in Seoul proper (over 10 million residents) has been extreme. There were 15,964 people per square kilometer in 2019.https://www.statista.com/statistics/1112322/south-korea-population-density-by-province/#:~:text=The%20population%20density%20of%20Seoul,Seoul%20was%20around%209.64%20million. (accessed on 1/14/2021).
2. All Translations in the text were done by the author.
3. Given a very high level of education among South Koreans, this is not uncommon among residents of the Greater Seoul area.
4. Interviews with KHJ, NE branch, on 11/01/2004; YSH, KG branch, on 12/13/2004; KDY, SW branch, on 3/11/2005; PCM, KG branch, on 4/11/2005. These qualitative data corroborate a survey of coop members conducted in the early 1990s. The most common motivation for joining the coop were "family's health" (34.1%), followed by "safety and trustworthiness of food" (26%) (Kim 2009, 11).

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## Appendix A.

**Table A1.** PFS coop interviewees by age and local branches age at the time of interview (number of interviewees).

| Time of interviews | NE branch | SW branch | KG branch | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2004–2005 | 30s (7) | 30s (4) | 30s (8) | 19 |
| | 40s (5) | 40s (3) | 40s (5) | 13 |
| | 50s (1) | 50s (0) | 50s (1) | 2 |
| Sub total | 13 | 7 | 14 | 34 |
| 2015 | 30s (3) | 30s (2) | 30s (2) | 7 |
| | 40s (3) | 40s (2) | 40s (2) | 7 |
| | 50s (1) | 50s (1) | 50s (2) | 4 |
| Sub total | 7 | 5 | 6 | 18 |
| Total | 20 | 12 | 20 | 52 |