

Catalyzing Women’s Leadership and Participation in Rural Development: The Case of Saemaul Women’s Associations in the Republic of Korea, 1970-1979



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Introduction

The Republic of Korea’s rapid transformation from a poverty-stricken and war-ravaged nation to the 12th largest economy in the world and an aid donor represents a significant transformation. Korea’s annual real GDP growth averaged 7.3 percent between 1960 and 2019.¹

While this growth began in Korea’s major cities, it was accompanied by rapid reductions in rural poverty.² One of the most high-profile programs contributing to this reduction in poverty was the New Village Movement (or New Community Movement; in Korean, Saemaul Undong, or SMU), launched by the administration of then-president Chung Hee Park in 1972. This community development program was intended to encourage an attitude of “self-help” and mobilize citizens in associations to undertake self-directed projects. The Ministry of Home Affairs implemented the program, with provincial and county (*gun*) authorities tasked with overseeing and supporting the village projects. Yet villages were responsible for choosing their own projects and for putting them into place—an arrangement sometimes characterized as “top-down and bottom-up.”³ This case study focuses on the implementation of the SMU in rural areas, where villages were encouraged to take a significant active role, as a collective, in their own processes of locally driven development.⁴ In particular, it focuses on how the SMU catalyzed increased participation of women in this program.

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1 World Bank, Republic of Korea Overview. Accessed September 28, 2020. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/korea/overview>

2 Han 2012. Some analysts have referred to this as a “rural development miracle” (Douglass 2013).

3 See Park 2009.

4 Some scholars note that the rural focus of the SMU has been over-emphasized, and it is of course worth noting that the SMU was also implemented in Korea’s cities, where the focus was on somewhat different types of projects.

In rural areas, Saemaul Undong operated as a “community conditional cash transfer” program.⁵ Villages involved in the program had broad leeway to create their own programs, with some material inputs from the government (e.g., cement for infrastructure projects), but with considerable focus on mobilizing local resources and achieving local self-sufficiency. After an initial period in which inputs, including funds, were provided to all villages, only villages that were evaluated as “self-reliant”—achieving significant gains in improving infrastructure and launching income-generating projects—received further funding.

One important aspect of the Saemaul Undong was its encouragement of women’s leadership in village projects. In 1973, the Saemaul Women’s Association (SWA) was established as a branch organization of the Saemaul Undong. After the establishment of the SWA, each village had one male and one female Saemaul leader, who were tasked with organizing village members to undertake a variety of local development projects—ranging from reforestation and building small bridges to the creation of village savings and improved agriculture programs, like planting orchards and building greenhouses. The program-within-a-program of the SWA, and the building up of women’s leadership that this entailed, has been credited with significantly changing women’s roles in rural society; with inspiring them to participate in village life; and with possibly having a long-term effect on such markers of women’s empowerment as increased school enrollment for girls.⁶

In turn, studies of the Saemaul Undong, as well as observers at the time, have in many cases highlighted the idea that women’s participation was a critical driver for the success of Saemaul Undong. The notion that women worked harder than men to carry out the Saemaul Undong is widespread, and contemporary publications praised their “iron-willed” determination. Indeed, the governor of Jeonlabugdo commented that in his view the Saemaul Undong was led by women.

Yet this effort was not without challenges. This case study examines how women’s leadership was promoted and integrated into Saemaul Undong, and some of the delivery challenges that it faced during the course of that process. The parameters of the program were determined by national-level policy makers, but given the locally-led

nature of village development projects in the Saemaul Undong, experiences varied widely, as each village—and each local Saemaul Women’s Association—attempted to implement experiments at the local level. Thus, while the program-within-a-program of women’s empowerment was promoted by national authorities, it was ultimately the women themselves, working with persistence within the specific contexts of their villages, who ensured the success of the Saemaul women’s programs at the village level.

And women seized the opportunity to promote their own agency within village life. The Saemaul Undong combined a top-down and bottom-up structure, in which the state provided guidance and some resources for villagers to use, while also providing broad leeway for villagers to choose and implement their own projects. This in turn opened a window of opportunity for women to improve their standing in public life.

Development Challenge: Rural Development and Women’s Empowerment

The goal of the Saemaul Undong was to reduce rural poverty, improve living standards in the countryside, and reduce the gaps in wealth between Korea’s booming cities and lagging villages. Almost 60 percent of the population of South Korea lived in rural areas, and almost 28 percent (more than 5.5 million people) of these households lived in absolute poverty – unable to fully meet basic needs. Testimonies from the time period attest to significant deprivation, to the point of many households lacking sufficient food and entire villages suffering from spring food shortages.⁷ Houses typically had thatched roofs and lacked electricity; basic infrastructure was in poor condition, and agricultural productivity was low.

The primary motivation of increasing women’s participation was largely as a means to contribute to the goals of local development and poverty reduction. Women were motivated to seize initiative and participate in the Saemaul Undong by the promise of a better life (the slogan of “living well” or “a campaign for a better life” was a rhetorical through line for the Saemaul Undong).⁸ This perspective is congruent with arguments for women’s

5 Han and Claasen 2017.

6 Seo 2019.

7 Han and Claasen 2017. “Poverty is my enemy.”

8 See, for example, author interview with Munja Chung, as well as presidential speeches accessed in the GRICKS archive.

equality and empowerment that argue that progress in this area is a good thing in and of itself, and that it would accelerate development.⁹ Legal equality for men and women, leading to equal participation of women and men in economic life, both increases women's ability to make the right choices for their households and communities and "is ... associated with improved economic outcomes" (World Bank 2020). One study of this period asserted that the program would be unable to make progress if "half the villagers"—that is, the women of the village—were excluded from development projects.¹⁰

Yet, if women's effective participation and leadership was necessary to allow Saemaul Undong to achieve its goals, women (and the women's program) would need to overcome entrenched traditions that relegated women to subordinate roles within the household and in public life. Strong Confucian and patriarchal norms meant that women were subject to the dictates of fathers, husbands (and fathers-in-law), and male authority figures within the home. Under Korea's family law (1960-1991), women could not become legal heads of household, and faced many other discriminatory provisions. Despite formally equal access to schooling, educational opportunities for women were typically restricted. And despite provision for legal equality under the Republic of Korea's 1948 constitution, women were effectively excluded from most leadership roles in government at the national level and in their communities.¹¹ This experience of confronting the challenge of resistance to women's participation—in political and civic leadership, economic opportunity, and public life—resonates with the contemporary development challenge of greater gender equality.¹²

Delivery Challenges

At the village level, as the government moved to put the Saemaul Undong program in place and to deepen women's participation within it, a number of delivery challenges (that is, obstacles impeding effective implementation or operation of the program) emerged.

9 In a seminal paper, Duflo (2012) surveys the relationship between women's empowerment and development. See also Devadas and Kim 2020.

10 Han 2012.

11 Until fairly recently, the exceptions that exist were largely of the kind that prove the rule, such as the public roles played by a handful of female heroes of the struggle for national independence.

12 See Devadas and Kim 2020; Chawla et al. 2017; and Domingo et al. 2015.

Social and Cultural Issues: Gender

Increasing women's participation and empowering them within the household and within public life meant that the women themselves would need to confront deeply-rooted social and cultural norms.¹³ Winning over community members who were opposed to women's empowerment and leadership was a crucial step in establishing women's leadership and effectively advancing the proposed projects of the SWAs.

Multiple documents assessing women's participation in Saemaul Undong quote the popular proverb "It goes ill for the house when the hen sings and the rooster goes silent" to illustrate prevailing attitudes toward gender roles. In essentially claiming that women should be quiet and not seek to voice complaints or elevate themselves, these attitudes emphasized women's subordinate position to men within the household and, by extension, in politics and public life.¹⁴ Indeed, women who were active in women's projects of the Saemaul Undong reported having this proverb quoted to them by fellow villagers and even their own family members as an argument against their participation in development and empowerment projects.¹⁵

Skills and Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity for the newly-created Saemaul women's groups was an important issue. Many women were poorly educated or illiterate. This posed a barrier to activities like record-keeping and keeping accounts for income-generating projects.

Opposition and Lack of Consensus

The problem most frequently encountered by Saemaul women's leaders was a lack of support from other women in the community. At first, interest was low in taking on additional responsibilities, since women already typically had a heavy workload within their households.

Increasing engagement within the village groups would be challenging. As the movement grew and organizations became more complex, interpersonal

13 Assessing the delivery challenges that impeded women's participation presents an interesting exercise in one particular aspect—that is, the extent to which the category of development challenge of advancing gender equality or women's empowerment overlapped with the analytical category of the "delivery challenge"—that is, deeply-rooted resistance to that very goal.

14 See Min Young Seo 2018; and Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013.

15 Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013.

conflict within these groups—disagreement over what kinds of projects to pursue and over who should get the credit—could also pose a challenge to the cohesiveness of the local SWAs. Testimonies from the period indicate that the effectiveness of the groups was in some cases hindered by the extent to which interpersonal conflict slowed decision-making.

Implementation: Top-Down and Bottom-Up

In 1970, president Park Chung Hee launched the Saemaul Undong program in a speech to provincial governors. Park made clear that modernization of South Korea's villages was a major priority for his government. Park, who took power in 1963, came from a rural background himself, and his familiarity with the problems of South Korea's rural villages presumably contributed to his keen interest in and promotion of this project.¹⁶

President Park laid out principles for this movement, stressing a need for both dedication by local officials and cooperation and self-help among villagers. The three cardinal values driving Saemaul Undong were presented as diligence, self-help, and cooperation, signaling the perceived importance of villagers working together to improve their own villages (ADB 2012). The program stressed that villages would receive some help from the national government, including provision of building materials and supplies, but that the villagers themselves would need to organize themselves, select projects, and provide significant inputs of labor and funds to improve infrastructure, income, and living standards.

Park conceived of Saemaul Undong as a movement for spiritual renewal—not merely a project to raise standards of living, but one whose success depended on moral fortitude and overcoming what were, to an extent, viewed as a defeatist mindset and backwards customs.¹⁷ From the beginning of the Saemaul Undong, Park took a strong personal interest in it. He received monthly reports on the program and even personally composed an anthem for the program (this anthem was performed at village meetings and group project gatherings).

Project implementation began later in 1970, with the provision of basic materials (cement and rebar) to villages

across South Korea. National authorities provided a list of recommended projects (largely infrastructural in nature), and stipulated that villages should select the projects to implement through village assemblies. Participation was not officially mandatory, and villages were in theory free to choose whatever projects they wanted—although they tended to choose the kinds of projects recommended by the government.

While the national government provided material inputs and moral suasion, and made decisions about how the program as a whole would be administered, villages had broad leeway to choose the kinds of projects they would implement. Implementation activities of Saemaul Undong took place at multiple levels. Inputs and encouragement emanated from the national level, while decentralized implementation of myriad small local projects was carried out in rural villages across Korea. The Saemaul Undong thus combined top-down and bottom-up aspects.¹⁸ The same would be true of the women's projects.

Increasing Women's Participation

At the inception of the SMU, women's activity mainly consisted of contributing labor for small-scale infrastructure projects. Many men in rural areas opposed even this relatively limited degree of agency. While President Park referred in speeches to the idea that women's active participation in SMU would improve their status, this did not automatically translate into participation, nor into a focus on women's issues.

The first group of SMU village leaders was made up of men. These popularly elected community representatives were in charge of mobilizing villagers and overseeing the implementation of projects, with the post held separately from that of the salaried "village head."¹⁹ The Ministry of Home Affairs established this arrangement in part to emphasize the spirit of voluntarism that was assumed to drive the SMU.

In 1972, the Ministry of Home Affairs' efforts to evaluate and adapt the program were ongoing, following the somewhat experimental launch of the Saemaul Undong (Han 2017). Early that year, the Ministry established the Saemaul Undong Leaders Training Institute, and began

¹⁶ See Oh 2018.

¹⁷ ADB 2012; Sonn and Gimm 2013.

¹⁸ See Park 2009.

¹⁹ The village head was a paid, male-dominated position with a long history in Korean rural life, whose main task was typically to represent the interests of his village before sub-county authorities and to liaise with those authorities.

to bring SMU leaders together for training courses. These trainings focused on instilling “Saemaul spirit” and teaching effective management techniques, along with site visits to successful projects and discussions to inculcate best practices for implementation of SMU projects (ADB 2012; Han 2017).

From their work on the first wave of SMU projects, these SMU leaders perceived that women were highly motivated to participate in the Saemaul Undong, and the relatively young and forward-looking cadre that predominated among the SMU leaders believed the program would benefit from women's participation.²⁰ The leaders observed the women's role in keeping households running and promoting the well-being of their families. For these reasons, male leaders urged greater participation of women as SMU leaders in their post-training evaluations.²¹ This was echoed by some of the trainers and agricultural experts who were at that time fanning out across the countryside to deliver leadership trainings.²²

Faced with the need to effectively mobilize women in the villages, and with male village leaders raising the issue themselves, the Ministry of Home Affairs adjusted the program so that each village's Saemaul Association would have a male and female SMU leader. These leaders would be co-equal, but women would focus on specific sets of projects, and on catalyzing the empowerment and participation of women. This dual leadership system catalyzed increased participation by women on SMU projects that responded to their specific needs and gave them leadership roles within their communities.

The first batch of female SMU leaders received training in June, 1973. In the following year, the “Saemaul Undong for Women” component of the program was launched and Saemaul Women's Associations (SWAs) began to be formed.²³

Establishing the Saemaul Women's Associations: Building on the Foundation of Preexisting Women's Organizations

The SWAs built on preexisting traditions of women's organizations in South Korean villages, leveraging the

existing capacity of these organizations to implement Saemaul Undong projects, and drawing on their membership to create the SWAs.²⁴ Ultimately, in fact, the SWAs would subsume most of these preexisting village-level institutions.

By the late 1950s, government-sponsored organizations had begun to be established in rural villages, with the aim of advancing local development. One such set of organizations was the Life Improvement Clubs, which were overseen by the Organization of Rural Agricultural Development of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. The Life Improvement Clubs were set up and supervised by a female agricultural extension worker, referred to as a Guidance Officer. The primary focus of these clubs was on organizing women to facilitate behavior change and improvements in health, nutrition, and living conditions. These clubs spread rapidly throughout the 1960s. By 1976—two years into the establishment of the SWAs—there were 28,371 village Life Improvement Clubs, with 34,803 guidance officers overseeing them. The program had become diversified to include education on child health, food processing and preservation, home management and various non-farm income-producing techniques, as well as a number of other types of projects.

Another important set of women's organizations were the Mothers Clubs—perhaps the most emblematic Korean women's organizations. This program also began in 1958, and were set up as twelve-person groups drawn from village catchment areas. Members of the Clubs were originally required to be literate mothers between 20 and 45 years old.

A core focus of the Mothers Clubs was family planning to fight poverty and improve women's health. A combination of narrow focus and restricted membership contributed to their success, as they were able to convince villagers to take part in family planning campaigns. They also became incubators for building women's leadership; the leaders of the Mothers Clubs were more likely to be literate, which later helped many of them become leaders of their local SWAs.²⁵

Between 1973 and 1977, this constellation of organizations worked in alignment with the broader Saemaul Undong strategy, coexisting and to some extent

20 Interview with Gab-Jin Chung, 2019. On the relative youth of the SMU leaders, and their presumed progressive views, see Han 2012, and Sonn & Gimm 2013.

21 Interview with Gab-Jin Chung, 2019.

22 These trainings focused on instilling “Saemaul spirit,” as well as site visits and discussions to inculcate best practices for implementation of SMU projects (ADB 2012).

23 Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013.

24 For example, traditional revolving credit unions (KYE) provided a base for local savings programs.

25 Both simultaneously—heading both the SWA and the Mothers Club—and leading the SWA after the absorption of other women's organizations by the SWA in 1977.

coordinating. As the Saemaul Undong continued to be implemented, with the active participation of the Saemaul Women's Association, the government saw the profusion of women's organizations as causing potential confusion and contradictions in policy. In July of 1977, a government decree consolidated the Life Improvement Club, Mothers Club, and other rural women's organizations into the Saemaul Women's Association. Activities previously carried out by other women's organizations were taken over by the Saemaul Women's Association, and the SWA created departments to cover these functions.²⁶ Moreover, as all rural women between the ages of 20 and 60 years old were required to become members of the expanded Saemaul Women's Association, the SWA absorbed the membership of these organizations. This in turn had an effect on the leadership cadre: about a third of the SWA village leaders after this merger were drawn from the leadership of the Mothers Clubs.

Setting up village-level projects

The kinds of projects put in place by the SWAs differed widely from village to village, but there were common patterns. Programs included the creation of savings groups and income generating projects; the establishment of local community stores and markets; communal kitchens; daycares and nurseries; and participation in temperance and anti-gambling campaigns. These projects typically started small (for example, saving a scoop of rice) and scaled up later as a way to minimize opposition within the village.

Savings programs and income-generating projects

This project was found in virtually every village and almost all the SWA members participated. The original idea was to save a scoop of rice per person at every meal before cooking. This could then be sold, and the proceeds deposited with a credit union or with the local Agricultural Cooperative Branch Bank collectively. The funds from these savings were then used to fund SWA activities.

The SWAs also organized additional projects for fundraising purposes, including paid public work and producing items for sale. Funds raised were then used

for the mutual benefit of all the participating families or the whole community. This might include purchasing communal kitchen utensils, payment of taxes, or social gatherings for village elders.

If the central goal of the Saemaul Undong was to produce a better life, income-generating and agriculture-diversifying projects played a central role. These varied widely based on the village and the region. A partial list of projects taken on in the village of Oryu-ri included the planting of chestnut trees, cultivation of raspberries, planting of soybeans to make soymilk, digging a pond to raise fish, and cattle-raising. These measures produced profits that could be reinvested or used for other purposes (for example, profits from the chestnut tree plantation were used to fund scholarships for village children).²⁷

Moreover, as women generated income for themselves, this increased their economic power within their households.

Community stores (and local markets)

The second most popular SWA project was the institution of a community store. Many villages that were located far away from marketplaces set up a store that carried various commodities necessary for daily life. This meant that women would not have to make a long trip to a far-away market. It also was seen as a means of keeping money in the community, rather than spending money in another town. By 1979, there were 24,891 such stores across South Korea.

Communal kitchen

Many villages organized a collective cooking and serving system for both the male and female farmers during the planting and harvesting seasons, when women's labor was most needed to supplement that of the men. It was seen as a modern version of the older custom of villagers participating in a labor-pooling arrangement for agricultural tasks (e.g., sowing, transplanting, or harvest). In 1979, there were 6,000 communal kitchens operating in the country. Sometimes, the operation of the communal kitchen was also used to raise funds for the SWA.

Daycare centers

The establishment of nurseries or community daycare centers systematized common practices of caring for

²⁶ For example, the SWA became instrumental in the family planning activities previously covered by the Mothers Clubs (Moon 2005; Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013).

²⁷ Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013.

neighbors' children with one's own. This more-organized provision of child care enabled women to work and participate in community activities. It was reported that there were 10,304 daycare centers in 1979.

Temperance and Anti-Gambling Campaigns

In many villages, the strong moral tone of the Saemaul Undong extended to campaigns against gambling and drunkenness. This complicated social issue was deeply intertwined with questions of local development and poverty. Particularly during winter seasons of unemployment, heavy drinking and gambling were common, as were stories of heads of household gambling away their family's belongings. Alcohol abuse contributed to domestic violence, and was viewed as a contributor to unproductive spending. And gambling and drinking tended to go together, with gambling taking place in taverns.

Many women (who typically did not enter these male spaces) considered drinking and gambling to be a major contributor to the poverty of their households.²⁸ In many villages, the local Saemaul Women's Association was an enthusiastic contributor to the temperance and anti-gambling component of the Saemaul Undong Movement, which aimed to increase household savings rates.²⁹ They did this in a variety of ways. In some cases, women burned playing cards, or burst into the taverns where their husbands were gambling to confront them in public. In others, they gave their support to local temperance advocates, galvanizing village assemblies to close down "problematic tavern(s)."³⁰ And in still others they advocated for restrictions on the kinds or quantities of alcohol available, mandating that local community stores only sell small bottles of liquor, to encourage moderation.

Addressing Delivery Challenges

While Saemaul Women's Associations achieved a wide variety of results, it was not a quick or easy process. They would have to overcome a set of delivery challenges,

manifesting largely at the village level and in ways shaped by the context of those particular villages and interventions. While the circumstances of particular villages varied considerably, a few recurring challenges were particularly common. If the Saemaul Undong, including its gender component, resembled "an array of experiments," then part of the process of experimentation would be tackling the particularities of these delivery challenges as they emerged.

Social and Cultural Issues: Gender

Within many rural villages, women's activities in support of the Saemaul Undong faced enormous suspicion and resistance from people opposed to women assuming greater public roles. Women who undertook public activities risked censure from their families, and even physical assault; for example, when members of one SWA attempted to establish a Korean folk band as a fund-raising activity, they were attacked with sticks by outraged elders.³¹

Many of the female Saemaul leaders adopted a strategy of, essentially, charm and patient persuasion to wear down the resistance of suspicious elders and recalcitrant in-laws. It was important to win over members of the village who felt they might have the most to lose from women's empowerment. Without the ability to resort to more-explicit legal mandates, this slower and delicate approach was seen as the best option available.

One strategy for winning over resistant family members was for the SWA to organize a short trip and a special meal for the daughter-in-law and the elders that she needed to persuade. This display of care helped the group gain credibility and trust from the elderly.³² Another tactic that some female leaders used was to prepare a monthly feast for all the elders of the village. This was a way to demonstrate their good faith and respect for this influential group within the village, and demonstrated that SWA's activities would benefit the village as a whole.³³ This slow strategy of cajoling paid dividends when, for example, groups of older women were convinced by their daughters-in-law to support the family planning activities of the Mothers Clubs.³⁴

²⁸ See Han 2012.

²⁹ It may be worth noting that this was not, per se, a prohibitionist movement, but a nuanced issue. Some women's organizations advocated the sale of alcoholic beverages in local markets, as a way of keeping money in the community and encouraging the consumption of liquor in the allegedly more wholesome setting of the home. Income-generating activities also included the production of wine (e.g., from raspberries).

³⁰ Han 2012.

³¹ This is not the only reference to women being attacked with sticks to appear in the literature on the establishment of the Saemaul Women's Associations.

³² Interview with Gab-Jin Chung, 2019.

³³ Interview with Gab-Jin Chung, 2019.

³⁴ Initially, there was resistance even to discussion of family planning. One interview explained that initially this was associated with "women's liberation," a term that at the time had negative connotations. Yet ultimately, even in particularly conservative areas, tactics of showing extra respect for elders and preparing meals for them was seen producing success.

Women’s group members also shared stories of using humor to disarm their interlocutors. One female leader, Hong Young Mae, had to convince an influential elder to support a water pipe project in the village. This would make a significant difference for women, who were often charged with bringing water for household needs. In an interview, she explained:

I asked “Elder! Do you think it is right that it goes ill with the house where the hen sings when the rooster is silent?”

When the notable answered that he did indeed feel that way, Mae countered by saying that she had begun to keep chickens, and that their eggs were bringing in a profit—but that when the noisy rooster crowed, he knocked over a tile and broke the eggs. The elder laughed, warmed to her, and ultimately agreed to support the water project.³⁵

Another strategy that some women leaders used to deal with opposition to women’s participation was to open discussion of complaints and potential suggestions in village assemblies and meetings. While this entailed considerable patience in some cases, and in effect putting up with suspicions and accusations of corrupting village life, it also slowly won over reluctant villagers.³⁶ To demonstrate that they were operating the SWA activities transparently, some groups shared their accounting with weekly village assemblies.

Skills and Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity for the newly-created Saemaul women’s groups was an important issue. Many women were illiterate, which posed a barrier to activities like keeping accounts for income-generating projects.

SWAs and Ministry implementers saw training as the answer to these issues of capacity. Some of the women’s group leaders who were literate gave classes in reading and math to their counterparts during the evenings. In some cases university students, pastors, and other better-educated villagers contributed their time to this exercise.³⁷ The SMU training centers also played a key role, offering classes in vital skills (e.g., bookkeeping).³⁸

At a more strategic level, the trainings focused on learning from successful cases, in which trainers presented a successful SMU project from another community and then facilitated a group discussion. These were well-received by the women who participated in discussions of successful cases, with one former trainer making the point that this was the most inspirational aspect of the curriculum.³⁹

Because the government lacked the capacity to bring leaders from all over a given county (*gun*), a more dispersed training program was instituted. SMU training programs (for both men and women) were set up in government agencies in sub-county offices. This allowed for a broader reach of training.⁴⁰

Opposition and Lack of Consensus

Even once the SWAs were set up, internal debates, feuds, and envy could easily pose a threat to the effective operation of the groups. In these small groups, even minor interpersonal disputes could become a significant problem.

There were power struggles among members of the SWAs over issues of prestige and transparency. Frequent topics of dissent included debates over leadership, who would hold the key position of bookkeeper, and transparency with funds raised. To deal with these issues, the Saemaul Leadership Training Institute introduced curricula on bookkeeping, conflict resolution, and transparency. Still, the individual diplomacy of Saemaul leaders was often an important factor.

The experiences of Munja Chung, whose work for the Mothers Club and SWA in the village of Oryu-ri were showcased by the Ministry of Home Affairs as a prominent example of the so-called Saemaul spirit, provided an illustrative example of the delicacy required to defuse tensions in the sometimes-charged settings of the local SWAs (as well as of the way that the government used these stories to disseminate presumed best practices). Munja Chung’s efforts to institutionalize the SMU in her home village were extensively documented by the Ministry. As she became more famous and was invited to speak about her experiences and discuss the success story of her village, other members of the Oryu-ri SWA and Mother’s Club felt that their own work was not being adequately recognized. Other core members even

35 Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013.

36 Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013.

37 Interview, Gab-Jin Chung, 2019.

38 Group interview at GRIKS, 2019.

39 Interview with Kimyung, 2019.

40 Interview with Gab-Jin Chung, 2019.

threatened to resign from the group. This would have been a significant blow to Oryu-ri's SMU initiatives, and Munja Chung took actions to salve hurt feelings within the group.⁴¹

This included the organization of a one-year anniversary ceremony for the project, at which other members were honored (Chung solicited special certificates from the governor to give as prestigious awards).⁴² Chung also shared the payments that she received for her speaking tour with the group, donating them to the Mothers Club to avoid the appearance of inappropriately benefitting from her status.⁴³

Also, internal conflicts occurred over management of the group fund. At that time, opening a bank account was a rare thing for most local villagers. Having the account in her name, however, raised issues of transparency and favoritism. To avoid the appearance of favoritism, she made the account book accessible for all members. That transparency helped diminish the internal conflicts.⁴⁴

Reflecting on Results (Short- and Long-term) and Lessons from the SWA Experience

By 1980, the Ministry of Home Affairs counted 64,902 Saemaul Women's Associations in rural areas. These organizations had become institutionally more firmly established, and had won greater acceptance at the community level. In a nation-wide study of SMU in 1980, 71 percent of respondents reported feeling positively about the women's contribution.⁴⁵ Another study of women's Saemaul activities reported that 92 percent of respondents agreed that women contributed very much or to some extent to community development.⁴⁶ The Saemaul Undong was regarded as a driver of both material improvement and moral renewal in the countryside, and women's contributions were seen as indispensable drivers of this impact.

Douglass (2015) asserted that many factors made the Saemaul Undong unique: the nature of the regime, the particular historical juncture (in which the SMU

represented a "bridge" between a postcolonial wave of community development projects and later practices of sector-focused development), as well as its coinciding in time with the Green Revolution (the set of agricultural technologies introduced in the 1950s and 1960s), which helped raise agricultural productivity in its own right. Thus, "lessons of the Saemaul Undong are historically bounded and contextually contingent."⁴⁷

Given the distance from its origins—almost half a century—and the way in which memories and interpretations are colored by the passage of time, it may be difficult to draw clear conclusions about the "how" of effective implementation. Moreover, as values shift, they also shift our interpretations of what lessons can be derived from a given case. While the work of the SWAs was clearly important to the SMU, their impact on broader issues of women's empowerment in Korea is less clear, and certainly difficult to quantify. Despite all these caveats, there are lessons and tentative policy implications that can be drawn from this case. It may start with the inspiring example of fortitude and persistence shown by rural women who, in very difficult circumstances, worked tirelessly to create a better life for themselves, for their families, and for their communities. In addition, this experience has lessons for the way we think about working within the complex social and political worlds of rural village life, for how we think about building on preexisting capacity, and about the political commitment necessary for ensuring durable women's empowerment. As such, the case study offers some lessons, or points of reflection, for development interventions and reforms that aim to increase women's participation. These speak both to the possibilities and the limitations of such projects.

Building on preexisting organizational structures

The Saemaul Women's Associations were not formed from whole cloth, but built on and benefitted from preexisting organizations that helped give them a head start in terms of capacity and leadership. Techniques employed by female Saemaul leaders—such as the slow processes of gentle persuasion to win over conservative-minded elders and in-laws—were pioneered by the Mothers Clubs. The SWAs drew membership and leadership from these organizations and benefitted from

41 Interview with Munja Chung, 2019.

42 Chung, Moon, and Lee 2013.

43 Interview with Munja Chung, 2019.

44 Interview with Mrs. Chung, 2019.

45 In-Joung Whang, *Hanguk ui Chonghap Nonchon Kaebal: Saemaul Undong Ui Pyongga wa Chonmang (Intergreated Rural Development in Korea; Evaluation and Prospect of SLU)* (Seoul: Korean Rural Development Institute, 1980) p.99

46 Yun-Seook Lee, et. al. op. cit., p 72

47 Douglass 2015.

their decades of experience. This suggests that initiatives aiming to achieve durable social change may benefit from building on antecedents and previously-existing forms of organization.

Working with the (Micro-)Politics

A number of recent publications enjoin development practitioners to “work with the grain” and “think and work politically.”⁴⁸ This is meant to drive home the point that development is a fundamentally political process. This would likely come as no surprise to the women of the SWAs, who, in pursuing economic development as well as empowerment inside and outside the home, showed a keen awareness of the political dynamics of their villages. This is a suggestive example of what these processes look like in practice at a very local level, and within a bounded historical scope: the small, complex, world of Korea’s rural villages in the 1970s. This is an example of what some scholars refer to as “micro-politics”—collective dynamics and the practices of politics within small groups of individuals.⁴⁹

Practices of working with these micro-politics included the strategic cultivation of influential elders; the patient approach that this cultivation took, particularly within the often very conservative units of the family; and knowing when to reach out to officials for help.⁵⁰ This work also showed how interpersonal dynamics in relatively small—and even highly motivated—teams can threaten to derail projects, and the adaptiveness needed to deal with this. And it illustrates well how the political and the personal can intertwine. Often, the first person that a woman needed to convince to facilitate (or at least not hinder) her participation in village life was her own husband.⁵¹

48 While the particulars of such approaches differ, they share a broad standpoint that politically-informed ways of working, driven by a keen understanding of local dynamics and moving beyond one-size-fits-all notions of best practice, ultimately enable development practitioners to work more effectively. For example, Laws and Marquette (2018) suggest that development work may become more effective through the practice of “thinking and working politically.” Levy (2014) argues that governance practitioners may need to “work with the grain” of politics in order to have tangible impact in their sector. And Wild and Foresti (2013) assert that service delivery, particularly for the poor, may need to “work with the politics.” This way of working may also enable practitioners to work more adaptively (see Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock; Green 2016; and Faustino and Booth 2015).

49 See, for example, King (2004) and McAreavey (2006).

50 For example, at a critical juncture—when members of her village were feeling particularly discouraged—Mrs. Chung reached out to a local governor to ask him for help encouraging members of the village to pursue their SMU projects, and solicited his help in getting her proposed project—a chestnut tree plantation—started.

51 Interview with Munja Chung, 2019.

The Importance of Patience and Long-term Political Commitment in Social Reforms

One of the apparent ironies of the Saemaul Women’s Association was that, for all the local acclaim that the program received, it did not lead to an immediate dramatic change in women’s representation or political power at the national level. Writing in 1993, two decades after the institution of the Women’s Saemaul Undong, Kyung Ae Park lamented that women were largely shut out of national political life.⁵² What women achieved, including real changes in terms of ability to participate at the village level, were not scaled up into larger strategies for women’s empowerment within society as a whole, and channels were not necessarily opened for greater political participation. Thus, with the program circumscribed at the village level, the gains in women’s status that it may have achieved are difficult to quantify. In 2019, Korea had the highest gender wage gap in the OECD. And as the wide recognition of the feminist social novel *Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982* makes poignantly clear, everyday sexism remains a live issue four decades after the women of the Saemaul Women’s Associations strove for greater participation in village life.

While a single big push on women’s empowerment and/or economic development is often implied to initiate a virtuous cycle of economic development and women’s empowerment, Duflo (2012) found that this was rarely the case. Rather, sustained growth in women’s empowerment requires a long-term political commitment; a big push for growth is not enough to make processes of empowerment self-sustaining. Thus, women’s empowerment remains of necessity a political project, with continued political commitment necessary to achieve lasting gains.

After 1979, the SMU was pursued with considerably less vigor, although aspects of the program remained active.⁵³ This may have weakened the impetus for continued empowerment of women at the village level.⁵⁴

Lasting gains for women, then, present a picture of slow and uneven progress, contingent and subject to a variety of social pressures. The gender ratio in births in the Republic of Korea (a proxy for gauging preference

52 Park 1993.

53 Indeed, the Saemaul Undong remains active as a program in countries ranging from Sri Lanka to Rwanda, as part of the Republic of Korea’s program of official development assistance.

54 Douglass, 2015. It is worth noting, however, that under Park programs of empowerment were indeed sharply limited to the village level – this administration had no female cabinet members (Park 1993).

for male children) began to decline sharply in the 1990s. By the 2000s, the Republic of Korea led Asia in the rate of reduction for male child preference.⁵⁵ The gap in educational attainment in primary, secondary, and tertiary education finally disappeared in this period.⁵⁶

Moreover, in terms of education, Seo (2018) finds an intriguing possible effect of women leaders in increasing the number of girls enrolled in schools. An increase in the cumulative number of female leadership trainees per district was associated with a statistically significant increase in the enrollment rate of girls in that district. [Seo posits that this is due to a role model effect, indicating that participation in the Saemaul Undong did, even if subtly, change women's status and (self-) perceptions.

It may also be worth noting that some individual women continued their careers as leaders after their participation in the SWAs. Munja Chung continued as a leader in the Saemaul Women's Association until 1980. After this, she became a congresswoman for Pong Nab Dong County in Cheonbuk District. As of 2018, she was serving on the Legal Committee of Cheonju City in Cheonbuk.

⁵⁵ Chung and Das Gupta 2007.

⁵⁶ Seo 2018.

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