

Catalyzing Women’s Leadership and Participation in Rural Development: The Case of Saemaul Women’s Associations in the Republic of Korea, 1970–79

Introduction

The Republic of Korea has undergone extensive social and economic transformation since the end of the Korean War: from a country with per capita GNP below US\$100 (Oh 2018, 63) to the 12th-largest economy in the world and an aid donor. Between 1960 and 2019, the country’s annual real GDP growth averaged 7.3 percent.¹

One of the major vehicles of poverty reduction in rural areas after 1970 was the Saemaul Undong (New Village Movement). This was a community development program that mobilized villagers to undertake group projects in a range of sectors, including construction of small infrastructure works, planting trees, agricultural projects (for example, constructing greenhouses), and the establishment of village savings groups.

This note focuses on a particular aspect of the Saemaul Undong: the establishment of Saemaul Women’s Associations (SWA), which worked to mobilize women to contribute to Saemaul Undong projects. This aspect of the program initially faced resistance within the conservative context of rural Korean villages, in which women were often expected to adopt a subordinate role within households and in social life more broadly. Yet women ultimately achieved greater participation in the Saemaul Undong and leadership in the SWAs. Their participation has been credited as a major driver of the Saemaul Undong’s success, and some studies suggest that it contributed to transforming women’s place in rural life and inspiring empowerment for greater gender equality.²

Development Challenge

The overarching development challenge for the Republic of Korea was to increase incomes and reduce rural poverty as part of the Saemaul Undong. The challenge of women’s empowerment and increasing women’s participation in rural development activities was nested within this overarching development challenge.

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

2 See, for example, Chung (2013). This initiative succeeded most clearly, in increasing women’s participation in the Saemaul Undong. Archival data, interviews, and secondary sources note that women who participated as leaders of the SWAs continued to work in development and politics as a result of their initial participation (see Bathanti and Choi 2020). For example, one study estimates that in regions with higher participation of women in the Saemaul Undong, girls today have higher graduation rates than in otherwise comparable areas, suggesting an inspirational “model” effect that travels across time (Seo 2018).



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PROJECT DATA

SECTOR:

Rural Development

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE:

Poverty Reduction; Rural Development; Women’s Empowerment

DELIVERY CHALLENGES:

Social and Cultural: Gender; Leadership and Commitment; Opposition and Lack of Consensus; Human Resources and Organizational Capacity

COUNTRY:

Republic of Korea

REGION:

East Asia

PROJECT DURATION:

1970–79

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The Intervention

The Saemaul Undong was initiated in 1970. Under the terms of the program, villages received inputs from the government and then could choose projects to work on. These decisions were made in village assemblies,³ chaired by Saemaul village leaders who were selected mainly (though not exclusively) in village elections. After the first phase (1970–73), in which villages nationwide received concrete and rebar, further investments from the central government were provided based on villages' performance, making it a "community conditional cash transfer" program.⁴ The second phase, which was initiated in 1973–74, focused more on income-generating projects. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) was charged with administering the implementation of the program nationwide, in coordination with provincial and county (*gun*) authorities; while villages implemented their projects in a decentralized fashion, MOHA and local authorities were charged with monitoring progress, distributing supplies and funds, and—critically—providing training.

After the first year, while women were informally encouraged to participate, Saemaul leaders noted that women's participation could be improved.⁵ State officials argued that rural development would be hobbled without women's participation. This led to the MOHA adjusting the structure of the program to increase women's participation by mandating a dual leadership structure, in which there would be one men's and one women's Saemaul leader. The first group of female Saemaul leaders attended training in June of 1973. The following year the Saemaul Women's Associations were launched. These organizations worked alongside, and eventually absorbed, older women's organizations, such as Life Improvement Clubs, which focused on health and nutrition projects, and Mothers' Clubs, which focused on family planning.

The Saemaul Women's Associations took on a number of different activities. These overlapped with projects that men participated in, such as income-generating projects and contribution of labor to communal projects. However, some income-generating projects were run exclusively by the SWAs, and other projects were largely implemented by the SWAs, including communal stores and kitchens, day care centers, and temperance and antigambling campaigns.⁶

Addressing the Delivery Challenges

The enactment and establishment of the Saemaul Women's Associations, and the increased participation by women in public life that this would entail, faced stiff opposition in many communities. Because implementation experiences varied from village to village, the challenges encountered varied as well. Nonetheless, some challenges were particularly common.

Attitudes toward Gender Roles

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced in increasing women's participation and enacting village-level SWA projects was entrenched social resistance to women taking an increased role in public life. Women who participated faced censure and resistance from their families, and in some villages community elders openly opposed the women's projects.⁷ This represented a potential veto point; if influential elders withheld their support from village projects, participation could be severely restricted.

To address these deep-rooted social attitudes, the women of the SWAs typically adopted a slow, patient approach. Influential figures like village elders and mothers-in-law needed to be won over gradually. Members of the SWAs

3 Voluntary in theory, but likely subject to substantial social pressure to participate. In some cases, nonparticipants in Saemaul Undong projects were barred from accessing the benefits or outputs of these projects (for example, forest resources; see Bathanti 2020).

4 For more detail on the Saemaul Undong, see Han and Claassen (2017).

5 In Bathanti and Choi (2020) we suggest, based on interviews with former leaders, that these cadres, being typically younger and (relatively) more progressive on some social matters, were more likely to be open to increased participation by women in social life.

6 In many villages, there was a strong moral tone implicit in the Saemaul Undong, which encouraged not just a spirit of self-reliance, but also moderation or abstinence from perceived vices, like heavy drinking and gambling, which were seen as sucking money out of households and thereby contributing to poverty. This did not entail a prohibition movement, per se; indeed, some SWAs participated in selling alcoholic beverages in local markets and producing wine from local fruit, which was seen as keeping money in the community. And some advocated consuming alcohol in "allegedly more wholesome" home settings (Bathanti and Choi 2020) rather than in "problematic tavern" spaces (Han 2012).

7 This even extended to violent resistance in some cases, in which women who were seen as excessively public were physically attacked and beaten.

lobbied and cajoled, organizing group picnics and other activities for elders in order to demonstrate respect—and to present the projects that the women’s groups were working on. Ultimately this was seen as critical to winning these groups over to support projects.

Lack of Consensus and Division within Women’s Groups

As the SWAs became more established, internal splits posed a potential threat to the operation of the groups. These micropolitical issues and small power struggles centered on issues such as who would hold leadership roles (such as the important position of bookkeeper), transparency of use of funds, and the extent to which different members felt their work was being recognized.

Delicate diplomacy was required to defuse these tensions. In an illustrative case, as one leader gained prominence and was invited to speak to other women’s groups, the members of her group felt that their own contributions to the success of their village were not being recognized. Tensions within the group rose, and some members threatened to quit. To repair the fabric of the group, this leader held a ceremony for group members, petitioning the governor of their province for special certificates to recognize their achievements. She also made sure that the group’s account book was accessible to all members in order to avoid the appearance of any favoritism or inappropriate benefits.

Human Resources and Organizational Capacity

Deficits in certain skills hobbled the collective organizational capacity of some Saemaul women’s groups. Women were not as encouraged to seek formal education as men, which meant that gaps in literacy hindered activities like bookkeeping for income-generating projects and recordkeeping for meetings.

To enhance the effectiveness of the women’s groups, programs to build capacity and facilitate joint learning were established both at a local, voluntary level, and at a wider governmental level. Women’s group leaders who were literate gave basic reading and math classes to their group members in the evenings, with other community members (for example, university students and pastors) pitching in to create night schools for SWA members. Formal training programs for skills like bookkeeping were set up in subcounty offices (these official classes catered to both men and women). Finally, the SWAs also sought to learn from the successful experiences of other organizations. Some leaders visited SWAs in various villages to present their experiences, with the presentation followed by a group discussion. This allowed for conscious adaptive learning and also served to inspire the groups that received these visits.

Lessons Learned

The case of the Saemaul Women’s Associations adumbrates a kind of puzzle—how should policymakers assess historical development interventions that aim to address concrete, immediate development challenges and that also have implications for long-term social change? As a historical case, the project of the Saemaul Women’s Associations is profoundly bounded by its temporal context over 50 years removed. Many factors (the composition of the regime that instituted Saemaul Undong; the Green Revolution) make this juncture unique (Douglass 2014). Yet examined in its context, the case suggests certain lessons, particularly in relationship to the challenges that community development projects may face as they seek to effect social change. Development practitioners in such settings may find that their work benefits from attention to the micropolitical dynamics that play out within rural life.

Building on Existing Foundations

It is important to note that the work of the Saemaul Women’s Association was constructed on foundations of previous gender-based programs. It is likely that the techniques of persuasion that SWA members employed were learned in part from these precursor groups, particularly the Mother’s Clubs, which faced initial strong resistance. Processes of learning from earlier experiences were important in identifying the most useful tactics to persuade key village stakeholders to support the work of the SWAs.

Working with the (Micro)politics

Commentators and analysts of development have called on practitioners to take into account the political processes that inevitably underlie development efforts and the political space in which development processes take place.⁸ And scholars have called for a greater attention to micropolitical dynamics—relationships between individuals and within small groups that shape their actions within larger processes (such as civil conflict, modernization, or development).⁹ These insights would likely come as no surprise, of course, to the women of the SWAs. As they worked for economic development and social change in their villages and households, they clearly were “thinking and working politically” on a small and intimate scale. This meant convincing elders and taking care not to alienate village stakeholders. It also meant being mindful of interpersonal dynamics within the core membership of the women’s associations, where resentments and irritations could threaten to derail projects and required sensitive and adaptive responses. This illustrates how the political and personal may intertwine. Indeed, many times women found that the first stakeholder that she needed to convince to facilitate her participation in Saemaul activities was her own husband. In this sense, politics, economic transformation, and social change began at home.

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⁸ See for example, the various claims that development practitioners’ work may benefit from “thinking and working politically” (Laws and Marquette 2018), that governance work is facilitated by “working with the grain” of existing politics on the ground (Levy 2014), and that effective service delivery can mean “working with the politics” (Wild and Foresti 2013). In turn, this kind of awareness of politics, at various levels, may lend itself to working more adaptively (see, for example, Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2012; Green 2016).

⁹ See, among others, King (2004) and McAreavey (2006).

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