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Progress for Women is Progress for All  
Women in Agriculture - Building a Sustainable Future

## Korean Women in Agriculture - the Saemaul Undong and Beyond

by

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**In 2011, IMF ranked Korea as the 6th in the world in terms of Incremental GDP (See Attached Table 1), which is a remarkable achievement considering Korean history of experiencing colonialism in the first half the 20th century and getting devastated by the Korean war in 1950. Korea is also experiencing successful transition toward democracy. This paper is based on the recognition that, behind such spectacular development was the efforts of Korean women, and especially those of women in agriculture.**

### **Saemaul Undong**

**Korea has achieved a Miracle of Han River through the Saemaul Undong (New community movement, New village movement) in the 1970's, and it is through this movement that women in agriculture emerged as Community leaders. Before the movement started, the status of Korean women in general was very low under the Confucian system which assumed the male superiority. As the process of industrialization started, young labor forces moved to the cities to get jobs, and women who remained in the countryside came to fill the vacuum and became the majority of rural labor force.**

**The Saemaul Undong is an example of strong role of the government in leading a rural movement. Also known as the New Village Movement or New Community Movement, it was a political initiative launched on April 22, 1970 by President Park Chung Hee to modernize the rural South Korean economy. It initially sought to rectify the growing gap between the urban centers and the**

small villages. Later focus was on building up rural infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> The movement promoted self-help and co-operation among the people, as the central government provided a fixed amount of raw materials to each of the participating villages free of charge and entrusted the locals to build whatever they wished with them. Villages that demonstrated success were then granted additional resources.<sup>2</sup> Its success can be attributed to its implementation of basic strategies of poverty reduction adapting to and making use of the Korean contexts - promoting opportunities and facilitating empowerment for rural people.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 below shows how the income gap was reduced as a result of the Saemaul Undong after a decade.

**Table 1. Ratio of rural household income to urban household income**  
(Unit: Korean won)

Year	Average monthly income of urban household (A)	Average monthly income of rural household (B)	Ratio (B)/(A) ( percentage )
1967	20 720	12 456	60.1
1970	31 770	21 317	67.1
1973	45 850	40 059	87.4
1976	95 980	96 355	100.4
1979	219 133	185 624	84.7

Source: Soon-Won Kwon (1997). "Korean experience in poverty alleviation with special reference to the Saemaul Undong", *Social Security Review*, vol. 13, No. 1, June (Korean Social Security Association), p. 194.

### **The government actively encouraged women's participation and provided**

<sup>1</sup> Soon-Won Kwon, "Korean experience in poverty alleviation with special reference to the Saemaul Undong," *Social Security Review*, Vol.13, No.1 June (Korean Social Security Association).

<sup>2</sup> Korea Saemaul Undong Center homepage.  
<http://www.saemaul.com/english/background.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Sooyoung Park, "Analysis of Saemaul Undong : A Korean Rural Development Programme in the 1970s" *Asia-Pacific Development Journal*. Vol.16, No.2, December 2009.

guidelines for their organization and activities. The Saemaul Undong did much to improve infrastructure in rural South Korea, bringing modernized facilities such as water systems, bridges and roads to rural communities. The program also marked the widespread appearance of houses with new roofs throughout the countryside, replacing the traditional thatched or *choga-jip* houses.<sup>4</sup>

Although it started as government-led movement, it ended up developing women leaders in rural areas. At least one person per family was asked to participate in the Saemaul Undong meetings, and many women participated when men were not available. So when it came to choose leaders, one male leader and one female leader were selected, which was a very radical departure from the tradition. At the same time, the government, in an effort to encourage rural women's participation, had each village elect a woman Saemaul leader and added the women leaders' training program in 1973 as an integral part of the Saemaul leaders' training programs. It also aggressively supported the projects rural women wanted in order to improve their living environment.<sup>5</sup>

"Saemaul Undong Women's Organization" was established in each Community and women's activities started playing the central role in the New Community Movement. In the 1970's, male leaders accounted for 35,595 persons and female leaders accounted for 35,528 persons.

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<sup>4</sup> William Boyer; Byong Man Anh (1991), Rural Development in South Korea: Sociopolitical Analysis (London: University of Delaware Press), pp.75-76.

<sup>5</sup> Sun Xue-yan, Korean Female in the View of New Village Movement (School of Ethnology and Sociology, the Central University for Nationalities, Beijing 100081, China) [http://en.cnki.com.cn/Article\\_en/CJFDTOTAL-HZSB200903008.htm](http://en.cnki.com.cn/Article_en/CJFDTOTAL-HZSB200903008.htm)

**The women leaders played the role of mobilizing other women during the Community development projects, and the Saemaul Undong contributed to developing women's leadership, strengthening women's status in the community, and improving the economic status of women.**

**From the outset of the movement, women were even more enthusiastic and implemental than men about the movement as they were promoting such programs as rice-saving campaign, raising funds for women, running village consumers' co-ops and day-care centers. Especially, they championed eradication of pubs from villages and burnt Korean playing cards called "Hwatu" as they believed that the backwardness of rural communities was largely due to men's habitual drinking and gambling. Women finally overcame a most difficult cultural obstacle, paraphrased in the old proverb, "Hen's crying ruins the house" which means that virtuous women are supposed to remain inactive. The Saemaul Women's association, thus organized, would lead the Gold Gathering Movement to help overcome the financial crisis of 1997.<sup>6</sup>**

**Women came to play a central role in opening bank accounts and saving their non-agricultural income, when they saved a spoon of rice for every meal, gathered them, raised fund and used for women's activities. It was the first time in Korea that farmers started opening bank accounts and saving. Soon the Saemaul Undong developed into the movement to increase non-agricultural income, and new Community factories were established to increase income.**

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<sup>6</sup> Goh Kim, "Saemaul (New Village) Undong in Korea - Factors of Their Success and Their Transferability" - [www.mynewsletter.co.kr/harmonykorea/.../eng.p...](http://www.mynewsletter.co.kr/harmonykorea/.../eng.p...)

**Korean women in agriculture contributed significantly to sustainable development by adding to economic value through various activities. In addition to increasing food production, they carried out family planning campaigns to gather hysterectomy volunteers for birth control. Some carried out joint farming by women's organizations, opened and operated Community stores and the mother's banks, thereby bringing direct benefits to Community women.**

**Such activities, however, were carried out under traditional constraints. Women still bore the major responsibilities for childrearing and domestic labor, as well as caring for in-laws. Korean women in agriculture were able to compromise with the patriarchal system by committing themselves faithfully to domestic chores, family and tradition.**

**As the time went on, the focus of the activities changed. Recently, the number of immigrant women is increasing in rural areas, and the Saemaul Undong women's movement is expanding into the new areas of supporting immigrant women workers and their children's education as well as sharing experiences with other developing countries. Some women in agriculture volunteer for Women's Hot Line, providing counseling for the victims of domestic and sexual violence, for example.**

**Now Korean women in agriculture are becoming the agents of agriculture entrepreneurship and as leaders in rural areas. In agricultural business, venture agriculture zones, and cyber agriculture meetings, it is easy to find women who are active participants. From 28% of women entrepreneurs in**

agriculture in 1970, the ratio increased to 52% in 2006. A computer has been an important tool for Korean women in agriculture. Out of the total of 1,195,000 agricultural households, 10.5% or 125,000 households utilize computers for agricultural business.

The government has been active in assisting women in agriculture to have access to new information and technology. The Rural Development Administration has been providing education and training to build internet homepages for farmers. For example, e-business mentoring training is currently provided to 600 people in 23 locations nationwide at night. Cyber women in agriculture are meeting their customers in cities through homepages, blogs and cafes. To give an example, Youngsoon Cho, CEO of Bonghwang 52 Farm, communicates with housewives in cities and sells cucumbers online. Many women in agriculture are becoming power bloggers. Korean women in agriculture should be supported with technology, management and marketing methods. Women can create new business by utilizing IT for food. Women could increase the number of local food, fresh, organic, safe, traditional and truly rural.

In recent years, many NGOs have been formed by women in agriculture. In Chilgok, Kyungbuk, for example, women gather together to cook jointly during busy farming season Association of Women CEOs in Agricultural Food opened a leadership academy for women in agriculture in cooperation with the Carnegie Research Institute of the U.S. The courses consist of leadership skill, communication and problem solving capacity. The Lifelong Education College

for women in agriculture at the Welfare center provides trainings in foot massage, sanitary and health education, and how to grow water plants at home. Some NGOs hold cultural festival of women in agriculture, and some focus on programs for immigrant women workers from China and Southeast Asia that are increasing in number in recent years.

#### **Government support for women in agriculture**

Korea imports agricultural goods and has 2-million deficit in agriculture trade. 120-trillion KRW has been spent to revive agriculture, but has not been very effective. Recognizing the need to support women in agriculture for national development,

Korean government legislated the Act to Promote women in agriculture in 2001, and formulates and implements the mid-term basic plan to train women in agriculture every five year. 20% quota is assigned to women in "the Project to Train Agricultural Successors".

The 3rd Policy to promote women in agriculture and fisheries is implemented by the government from 2011. The Ministry of gender equality and family implements the 2011 Women in agriculture employment project to provide stable employment to women in agriculture by developing the products utilizing local resources in rural area and generating profit. 1.1-billion KRW is set as budget for 2011. The ministry selected 9 companies run by women in agriculture to be assisted with training, consulting, commercialization, and marketing.

Various local governments also have programs for women in agriculture. For example, Chungwon-kun Agricultural Technology Center provides various



education to develop the skills of rural women and spread green life style and provides training in table setting, fumigated food, pottery, guitar, natural dying, healthy exercise, and cooking.

Kyungbuk-do Agriculture Technology Institute (Jang-Hee Chae) published a book to advertise the products of rural women's food processing business center such as traditional Korean cookies, tea, beverage, pastes, rice cake and marinated vegetables. Their revenue after 3 years was about 60-million KRW a year, and 27 locations already make more than 100-million KRW a year. One location developed unique dry bean paste and displayed it at Foodex Japan exhibition in Japan already.

### **Obstacles**

However, despite the miraculous economic development of the nation, Korean women in agriculture still lag behind in terms of Millennium Development Goal 3, Gender Equality.

The difficulty that most women in agriculture experience is in their multiple roles in farming and domestic chores, childrearing, supporting in-laws. There is a need for the government and society to provide support so that they can make their roles compatible. At the present time, childcare centers are open only when there are 40 or more infants in the area. Some local governments now have childcare information center when there are 10 or more children, which was made possible by a women's NGO that kept on pressuring the leaders of the local government (in this case, the governor of Kyungbuk province.)

The second difficulty is the lack of access to expert knowledge, farming

**technology, management skill, processing, marketing, information and government fund.**

**For example, women still stay in the labor-intensive field farming, while men are concentrated in the machine-centered rice field farming.**

**Another issue that stems from gender inequality is the land ownership. 70.3% of the family land is owned by males and only 26.3% is owned by aged widows. Very few women own land. When women don't own land, they are not recognized as women in agriculture. They cannot receive national pension if they don't own land. Government financial assistance is given to the male heads of household. It is necessary for the government to help women in agriculture to own land and property and to provide financial assistance.**

**There is also disparity in access to education and training. When the government provides education and training for farmers, mostly males participate because women are not recognizes as entrepreneurs. So we need to improve the system so that both the husband and the wife could participate.**

### **Recommendations**

**Based on the above review of Korean experience, the following recommendations are made to enhance the role of women in agriculture to further achieve the Millennium Development Goal 3, gender equality.**

**First, to help the compatibility of agricultural work and domestic chores, provide married couples' programs on sharing domestic chores and child rearing as well as being loving spouses.**

**Second, expand child care centers in rural areas.**

**Third, strengthen programs for multicultural families and immigrant women workers such as cultural understanding, Korean language and history, and vocational trainings.**

**Fourth, provide education and training on e-business to women in agriculture and increase their access to computers through Lifelong Education Centers.**

**Fifth, provide education and training to help women raise highly value added agriculture suitable for the local characteristics, environment friendly and sustainable.**

**Sixth, provide education and training to women in agriculture to become agricultural entrepreneurs and CEOs.**

**Seventh, encourage and help women in agriculture to own land and property and provide financial assistance.**

**Eighth, national pension should be extended to women in agriculture.**












**Ninth, establish a Research Institute for Women in Agriculture to carry out the development and research of policies for women in agriculture, and Tenth, assign personnel in charge of women in agriculture at each local government.**

**Women in agriculture should have political leaders and NGOs to monitor government policies, demanding improvement and suggesting alternatives.**

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Attachment: Table 1 2011 GDP

Rank	Country	GDP (billions of USD)	Share of Global Incremental GDP	Annualized GDP Growth
	<i>World</i>	<b>12,173.900</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>4.6%</b>
1	 <b>China</b>	3,982.470	32.71%	13.6%
2	 <b>India</b>	1,358.450	11.16%	10.9%
3	 <b>United States</b>	1,036.140	8.51%	1.8%
	 <i>European Union</i>	949.937	7.80%	1.6%
4	 <b>Brazil</b>	452.663	3.72%	6.1%
5	 <b>Indonesia</b>	282.220	2.32%	8.4%
6	 <b>South Korea</b>	268.174	2.20%	5.2%
7	 <b>Russia</b>	260.758	2.14%	3.1%
8	 <b>Germany</b>	245.872	2.02%	2.2%
9	 <b>Argentina</b>	186.084	1.53%	8.9%
10	 <b>Turkey</b>	166.360	1.37%	4.7%
11	 <b>Taiwan</b>	165.963	1.36%	5.8%
12	 <b>Mexico</b>	162.777	1.34%	2.7%
13	 <b>Poland</b>	142.546	1.17%	5.7%
14	 <b>France</b>	142.482	1.17%	1.7%
15	 <b>Iran</b>	139.535	1.15%	4.4%
16	 <b>Saudi Arabia</b>	128.810	1.06%	5.9%
17	 <b>Canada</b>	127.482	1.05%	2.5%
18	 <b>Australia</b>	126.854	1.04%	4.0%
19	 <b>Nigeria</b>	119.874	0.98%	10.1%
20	 <b>Egypt</b>	111.026	0.91%	6.9%
	<i>Remaining Countries</i>	2,567.360	21.09%	

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database, September 2011: GDP list of countries. Data for the year 2010. (<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2011/02/weodata/weorept.aspx>)