



**Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-ninth session**

Realizing the rights of marginalized and disadvantaged women and girls

PANEL DISCUSSION

The Role of Rural Women in Development and Policy Options for Progress

by

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

South Korean rural women experienced marginalization and multiple discrimination during the early phase of the country's economic development. They were excluded from education, employment and political participation because of South Korea's economic development since the 1960s was concentrated in urban areas, and educational opportunities and income earning jobs were out of reach for women in rural areas. In the early 1970s, the South Korean government established a rural development program named the Saemaul Undong (SMU or New Village Movement).

Although the SMU was not intended for women's empowerment, it provided important opportunities for women. Rural women took full advantage of SMU and they earned income outside of their homes, participated in leadership training, worked to help close down bars where the village males were idling away their time and money, and led rural communities to join family planning campaigns.¹ Women also used the extra income they earned to help educate their children so that they would have a better future than themselves.

The Saemaul Undong (SMU) had a top-down and bottom-up component. The top-down policies of the government included selecting women and men leaders from each rural community to organize self-help work for rural development. Since women did not have many opportunities to be educated and work outside of the home, the fact that SMU selected women leaders to head local Women's Clubs was a catalytic strategy for women's employment and empowerment. Through these clubs, women were able to lead the bottom-up efforts to improve their lives in rural areas. Women participated in income generating activities, attended self-help training, and improved the environment in the community. These efforts, however, did not automatically and quickly lead to women's greater participation in political affairs or to changes in laws that discriminated against women.

Successful policy interventions

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 was very important for the South Korean women to work toward institutionalized reforms in law, policies, and programs. The South Korean government adopted the "work assistance program for women farmers" in 2000. When a woman farmer stops working due to childbirth, an assistant is dispatched and takes care of the farming. A similar rural help program was piloted in 2006 and adopted nationwide in 2007, which dispatched assistants when farm household members were incapacitated due to accident or disease.² When domestic violence occurs in rural areas, it is not easy for the victims to escape to a safe place due to limited transportation. For women farmers, who are alienated from social services and safety nets, the Women Farmer's Centers have been established since 2002.

In order to meet the demand of women farmers in new farming machines suitable for their labor in harvesting, seeding and transplanting, 89 different machines were developed between 2000 and 2008. For households that have difficulty purchasing agricultural machines, the government opened rental shops -- a total of 92 shops by 2008 and 40 additional shops in

¹ Park (1981), Park (2009)

² All presented cases were quoted from Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW/C/ROK/7), pp. 31-33

2009.

The enforcement of decrees in June 2008 of the “Basic Act on Agricultural Rural Areas and Food Industry” amended in December 2007 recognized the legal status of women farmers, who have not been regarded as independent agents carrying out economic and social activities despite being the core labor force in agriculture. Women were finally recognized as agents of agriculture since they were actually engaged in agricultural production even though they did not own production means (land) or profits from products (agricultural sales income). The government adopted a gender quota of 20% women in the “Young Farmers (agricultural successors) Initiative program. In addition, 20% quota for women has been set for selecting participants for the “Agricultural Internship” and “Guardians for Startup Farmers” programs.

The second 5-year plan on Fostering Women Farmers recognizes women farmers as equal partners to male farmers in agricultural products and management and as active sovereign agents entitled to all the rights. With the goal of improving the quality of life of women farmers, the plan helped to achieve policy goals including recognizing women farmers’ occupational status and rights, increasing women’s participation in producers’ organizations, providing support for business startups by women, expanding women’s rights to pensions and insurances, improving the cultural environment for women, and adopting gender-impact assessment.

South Korea was very successful with rural development through the SMU, and SMU has great potential to be transferred to other developing countries. For example, an important element of the SMU was the improvement in the infrastructure of rural areas³:

- Expansion of rural village roads: 43,558 km
- Construction of new agricultural roads: 61,787km
- Installation of small bridges: 79,516 km
- Housing improvements: 225,000 units
- Construction of sewage systems: 15,559 km
- Connection of electricity to rural and fishing communities: 2,777,500 households
- Building public wells: 3.45 per village
- Public compost pits: 2.01 per village

Improvement of infrastructure in rural areas has diverse positive impacts: agricultural productivity is increased with the use of agricultural machinery, which can be used with improved rural infrastructure including roads and electricity; market access is improved; and farmers are better able to take inventory of their resources and enhance their savings. In addition, the cultural gap between rural and urban communities is reduced; and health and sanitation is improved with the provision of safe drinking water and sewage system.⁴

Although these did not target women exclusively, the impact was large for women since many of these activities reduced women’s household chores and allowed women to spend more time for their education, children’s education, and income-earning activities. KOICA has been implementing many gender-sensitive rural development programs based on lessons

³ KOICA (2014)

⁴ Ban (1981), Park (2009)

learned from South Korea's own experience of rural development including the SMU. Some examples are as follows: gender mainstreaming training class in Ghana's rural development project; inviting rural women in local water committee in Ghana's Water and Sanitation project; toilet and house renovation program in many developing countries, and gender quota policy for capacity development programs and trainings.⁵

The Korean National Council of Women (1959) and Korean Women's Association United (1987) are two pillars in women's movements in South Korea.⁶ These associations and many NGOs have formed partnerships to promote the status of women and protect women's rights.

The Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 ignited and encouraged women in various fields to form an alliance to work together on various women's issues. Korean Women Peasant Association and Korea Women Farmers Federation were founded in 1989 and 1996, respectively.⁷ They worked together to advocate policies for women farmers, run programs for capacity building, research, and international cooperation for improving women's life in rural areas.⁸ KOICA works closely with these women's groups to learn lessons and incorporate their experience in international development programs. In addition, KOICA works closely with UN agencies in different rural development projects. KOICA supports UNDP in Rwanda to provide financial services and capacity building for rural women and youth; works with UNICEF in Cambodia to improve maternal health care for underprivileged population; and works with UN Women and UNFPA to develop projects in Nepal and Vietnam.

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⁵ KOICA Gender Strategy & Activity leaflet (eng)

⁶ See <http://www.knew.or.kr/> and http://www.women21.or.kr/main2_2.php

⁷ See <http://www.waff.or.kr/> and <http://www.kwpa.org/index.php>

⁸ Korean Women Peasant Association (2014)

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Korean Women's Association United <http://www.women21.or.kr/main2_2.php>

Korea Women Farmers Federation website <<http://www.waff.or.kr/>>

Korean Women Peasant Association website <<http://www.kwpa.org/index.php>>