

# Women's Political Participation in Korea

Minjeoung Kim

**Abstract**—This paper deals with the development and obstacles of Korean women's political participation in recent years. Since the year 1948 after the declaration of a modern state, Korea has tried to establish the democracy but still in the field of women's political participation it meets a lot of problems such as women's political consciousness, male dominated political culture and institutional constraints. After the introduction of quota system in the list of political party, women's political participation began to change its configuration. More women candidates have willingly presented at elections.

**Keywords**—Korean women, political participation, quota, education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

KOREA'S document modern political history begins in 1945 with a sharp, clean break with the past. New political institutions modeled on international designs were constructed. Before Koreans could adapt to these, they became involved in an internationalized civil war followed by two periods of military rule.

These military rules accelerated the inferior political status of Korean Women. With the Confucian culture, women's social role was restricted to domestic life including rearing children and house work. Politically, they were at best a political appendage or the governed.

In the 1990s, Korea pushed away the military rules and made a transition into a more democratic political system. While the political system became more democratic, it also became more accessible to ordinary people including women. Actually the military government used women as an instrument of their rationalization. The military government, lacking popular support, wanted to find their supporters among professional females such as professors and leaders of interest groups (doctors, nurses, and teachers).

These female professionals were recruited in the Parliament not only for supporting governmental policies but also for showing that the government was not so bad because these intellectuals supported the government. This is the beginning of women's recruitment as politicians. After the democratization of the political system, Korean women, in political life, began to do what Americans and Europeans began in the 1920s. Women tried to be elected in legislative elections and to eliminate obstacles which hindered women's participation.

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## II. OBSTACLES THAT HINDER WOMEN FROM ENTERING IN POLITICS

First of all, the culture which forces people to accept segregated sex roles is the most important factor to hinder women from entering in politics. In most societies which develop from the agriculture society, men are the bread-earner for supporting household and women are housewives and child-rearers. This stereo-typed sex role tells us that politics is not a domain for women and women have to stay at home and to take care of children and house [1]. That's why there are few women who want to do politics.

However, as many Western societies show us, while the nature of society changes from one based on the physical power to intellectual power, women also can work out of the home. In the 1960s, women started to work out of the home. In several countries such as Sweden and Norway where the population is rarely dense, women had previously worked out of the home. Consequently, family relationships under the traditional patriarchal system needed to be changed. At the beginning, women worked out of the home and at the same time, lived as they had lived before. Increasingly, they raised consciousness about their oppressed and limited social status. Furthermore, they got the self-confidence as a member of society equal to men. They found out many problems around them including their burden of life, their status in society, and their unequal treatment. They recognized that these problems could be solved through politics. Therefore women have become more interested in politics.

One of factors that can change segregated sex roles is the education [2]. In traditional societies, women stayed at home without any education that would motivate them to work out of the home and would provide skills to get a job. While women are educated, they can work out of the home, and then segregated sex roles will change.

Secondly, the characteristics of the political system are important. The more rigid the political system and the more centralized the political system is, it means that the opportunity structure is not open and it is hard for newcomers such as women to enter in [3]. The political system includes the electoral system along with features of the government. A military government may be a very centralized, closed government. The military government faces anti-governmental groups in favor of the democracy and to survive such opposite visions, it thoroughly controls the power. They are afraid of attacks from other groups in a power struggle. Therefore, usually a military government is more centralized than a democratic government. While the government controls the political structure, the recruiting channel is very limited and it is hard for women or persons not connected to the government to

access it. Additionally, male centered ideology prevails under the military government.

The electoral system is also important. It is the rule of political game. The FPTP is the most restricted for established politicians and the PR, with a list, is less restricted. Therefore, it is said that the PR is more favorable to women to be nominated as candidates [4]. Why? For a party to win legislative elections, under the FPTP, it ought to designate a candidate, who is an influential person, so-called, well-known in an electorate. It is hard for a woman politician to be nominated as a candidate because the party is not sure that she would win. However, the PR system is more favorable to women because electorate votes according to the preference of party not of individual candidate. It is often that electorate does not know candidates well.

Many researches show that the PR system is favorable to women if other conditions are equal. There are more women parliamentarians in PR system than in the FPTP. Among the fifty-eight nations ranked by the World Economic Forum, forty-six of them use either a variant of the single-member constituency or a variant of list proportional representation election systems. Single-member district nations, including South Korea, average 15.81 percent women in the lower house of their national assembly while nations using list proportional representation average 24.31 %.

TABLE I  
ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND PERCENTAGES OF WOMEN MP [4]

Electoral system	% of women MP	Number of cases
FPTP & FPTP PR mixed	15.81	12
List PR and MMP	24.31	34
All	22.09	46

### III. WORLD-WIDE COMPARISON

TABLE II  
WOMEN MP [5]

Rank	Country	Lower or single House			
		Elections	Seats*	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	2008	80	45	56.3
2	Andorra	2011	28	14	50.0%
3	Cuba	2008	586	265	45.2%
4	Sweden	2010	349	156	44.7%
5	Seychelles	2011	32	14	43.8%
6	Senegal	2012	150	64	42.7%
7	Finland	2011	200	85	42.5%
8	South Africa 1	2009	400	169	42.3%
9	Nicaragua	2011	92	37	40.2%
10	Iceland	2009	63	25	39.7%
11	Norway	2009	169	67	39.6%
12	Mozambique	2009	250	98	39.2%
13	Denmark	2011	179	70	39.1%
14	Netherlands	2012	150	58	38.7%
15	Costa Rica	2010	57	22	38.6%
24	Germany	2009	620	204	32.9%
27	New Zealand	2011	121	39	32.2%
"	Slovenia	2011	90	29	32.2%
34	Switzerland	2011	200	57	28.5%
38	France	2012	577	155	26.9%
47	Australia	2010	150	37	24.7%
"	Canada	2011	308	76	24.7%
55	Singapore	2011	98	23	23.5%
"	United Kingdom	2010	650	145	22.3%
63	Italy	2008	630	136	21.6%
66	China	2008	2978	635	21.3%
"	United States of America	2010	430	73	17.0%

"	Venezuela	2010	165	28	17.0%
88	Albania	2009	140	22	15.7%
"	Republic of Korea	2012	300	47	15.7%
89	Dem. People's Rep. of Korea	2009	687	107	15.6%
100	Bahamas	2012	38	5	13.2%

GEM rank of Korea is 53. GEM is a measure for empowerment to show how women are in a position of power. Korean women are in a developing situation in the politics, for example, in the parliament Korean women are represented 13.4%. This is less than many European countries but more than countries of other regions. However, except the politics, Korean women are far from the empowerment situation. Few of them are in the senior officials and managers, professional and technical high profile positions. And also their income is estimated about 46% of men's.

TABLE III  
GENDER EMPOWERMENT MEASURE [6]

GEM rank	H DI	Country	GEM values	women MP	A	B	C
2	1	Norway	0.906	36	31	51	0.77
3	12	Finland	0.902	42	29	55	0.73
4	16	Denmark	0.896	38	28	52	0.74
5	6	Netherlands	0.882	39	28	50	0.67
6	17	Belgium	0.874	36	32	49	0.64
7	2	Australia	0.870	30	37	57	0.70
8	3	Iceland	0.859	33	30	56	0.62
9	22	Germany	0.852	31	38	50	0.59
10	20	New Zealand	0.841	34	40	54	0.69
11	15	Spain	0.835	34	32	49	0.52
12	4	Canada	0.830	25	37	56	0.65
13	9	Switzerland	0.822	27	30	46	0.62
15	21	UK	0.790	20	34	47	0.67
16	23	Singapore	0.786	24	31	45	0.53
17	8	France	0.779	20	38	48	0.61
18	13	United States	0.767	17	43	56	0.62
21	18	Italy	0.741	20	34	47	0.49
23	27	Israel	0.705	18	30	52	0.64
28	25	Greece	0.677	15	28	49	0.51
34	29	Slovenia	0.641	10	34	56	0.61
57	10	Japan	0.567	12	9	46	0.45
61	26	S. Korea	0.554	14	9	40	0.52
..	11	Luxembourg	..	23	..	..	0.57
..	24	Hong Kong	..	..	30	42	0.73

A: Female senior officials, managers  
B: Female professional and technical workers  
C: % of estimated female to male earned income

TABLE IV  
GENDER INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION (RATIO OF FEMALE TO MALE) [6]

Country	GEM rank	GPE f/m	GSE		GTE	
			f/m	female[%]*	f/m	female[%]
Norway	1	1.00	1.01	114	1.54	97
Sweden	2	1.00	1.00	103	1.55	100
UK	14	1.00	1.03	107	1.39	70
US	15	0.99	1.02	95	1.40	97
France	18	0.99	1.00	116	1.29	64
Poland	39	0.99	0.99	99	1.41	74
Mexico	46	0.98	1.07	83	0.99	24
Japan	54	1.00	1.00	102	0.89	52
S. Korea	64	0.99	1.00	93	0.62	69

GPE: Gross Primary Enrolment, GSE: Gross Secondary Enrolment, GTE: Gross Tertiary Enrolment, f/m : ratio of female to male.

\*The female enrolment ration is the ratio of enrolled children of the official age for the education level indicated to the total population at that age. Enrolment ration exceeding 100% reflect discrepancies between two data sets.

Education is important for women to participate political life

because education makes women to understand their social problems and their social needs. Also through education, women are qualified to work outside, such as participation of economic activities. 30% of Korean women of the official age for the tertiary educational level are not benefited to this level of education while Norwegian and Swedish women are fully enjoying their right to education.

TABLE V  
GENDER INEQUALITY IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY [4]

Country	GEM rank	Female economic activity*[%]	f/m	Contributing family workers (f:m)
Norway	1	63.1	87	43:57
Sweden	2	58.8	87	55:55
US	12	59.6	81	64:36
France	..	48.2	79	..
UK	16	55.0	79	60:40
Poland	30	47.9	78	60:40
Mexico	35	39.9	49	51:49
Japan	42	48.5	65	80:20
S. Korea	53	50.1	68	89:11

\*Female economic activity ratio is the ratio for the female economic activity population of female population ages 15 and older.

Economically, we can say that Korean women, half of economic activity age population, still stay at home and mostly responsible for the household work. Additionally, they work outside more than Mexican women, but they still work more inside house than the later. It means that Korean women have double burden of economic activities and household work. That is because some women want to work outside, but still they are required to the house chores due to an incompletely enlightened segregated sex role.

#### IV. ENHANCEMENT OF WOMEN'S PLACE IN KOREAN POLITICS

While one cannot minimize data showing Korea's poor success in politically empowering women, but one can place it into perspective, a perspective in which Korea has made more progress than initial impressions suggest.

TABLE VI  
YEARLY ELECTION OF MALE AND FEMALE CANDIDATES [7]

year	single member		two members		National List		All			f [%]
	m	f	m	f	m	f	f	m	all	
1948	199	1					1	199	200	0.50
1950	208	2					2	208	210	0.95
1954	202	1					1	202	203	0.49
1958	230	3					3	230	233	1.29
1960	232	1					1	232	233	0.43
1963	130	1			43	1	2	173	175	1.14
1967	130	1			42	2	3	172	175	1.71
1971	153	0			46	5	5	199	204	2.45
1973			144	2	63	10	12	207	219	5.48
1978			153	1	70	7	8	223	231	3.46
1981			183	1	84	8	9	267	276	3.26
1985			182	2	86	6	8	268	276	2.90
1988	224	0			69	6	6	293	299	2.01
1992	236	1			55	7	8	291	299	2.68
1996	251	2			39	7	9	290	299	3.01
2000	222	5			35	11	16	247	263	6.08
2004	233	10			27	29	39	260	299	13.04
2008	231	14			27	27	41	258	299	13.71
2012	227	19			26	28	47	253	300	15.66

The percentage of women MP is continuously increasing,

and after 1990's, it is observed an apparent raise up in the percentage of women MP. In 1970's, there was a sudden augmentation of this percentage. It is because the military government changed the electoral system from single district plurality system to a mixed system. The mixed system is a system combining a two member plurality system and a national list system, a system to allocate the seats proportionally, according to the ballots obtained in the plurality system. This portion of parliamentary seats was to make always the governmental party majority in the Parliament. The military government designated this portion of MP to pro-government elites including female professionals such as professors, medical doctors, and leaders of interest groups. These women were typical token women the government took advantage of for the camouflage of the regime's non-democracy.

As the regime is democratized, the opportunity to access power became more open. In 2000, just before the legislative election, the electoral law changed to stipulate 30% of the party's list must be women candidates. In 2004, the electoral law changed again to require that parties nominate women to 50% of the lists and 30% of the district positions. Even though these laws did not go with an article for the compulsory implementation, in 2004, most parties reserved 50% of the list for women, even several parties put women in odd numbers of their parties' lists. These changes brought to enter 6.08%, 13.4% of women to the Parliament respectively.

Changed environment pushed women politicians more to run for elections. In the 1990's, the number of women running for legislative elections are increasing. Due to the resistance of family, the anxiety to be defeated and the lack of resources, women have hesitated to run for an election, but owing to the change of electoral laws favorable to women, women become courageous to run for an election.

TABLE VII  
YEARLY NUMBER OF WOMEN CANDIDATES [7]

year	Total	male	female
1988	1041	1012	28
1992	1052	1031	21
1996	1389	1367	22
2000	1040	1007	33
2004	1175	1109	66
2008	1301	1086	215
2012	1090	948	142

#### A. Public Attitudes

In Korea, Confucianism has been in the center of social culture and it became a standard or central value for people's behavior. According to Confucianism, one's rights and opportunities are defined mainly by one's sex. It teaches that Father gets careers, mother governs house, and Girls must be gentle, obedient and Boys ought to be brave, valiant [8]. After the introduction of Western systems, Koreans learn different values in school, for example, equality value and are aware of internationally known customs which is required in a democratic society. Family, work and political life are arenas where Confucian and democratic values conflict. It is known what is good for the society with the reason, and at the same time people live in the way that one has lived. This conflict can

be seen in elementary school student responses to a 1983 survey. They overwhelmingly agree that women should take care of the home and children while men have careers but at the same time think women should have the same political and career opportunities as men.

TABLE VIII  
ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN'S ROLE [8]

Politics is for men. Women should not be involved in government and politics.					
agree	18.4%	Disagree	81.6%	participants	2097
Women should have children and keep house. Men should work and have a career.					
agree	68.1%	Disagree	31.9%	participants	2097
Women and men have the same opportunities for careers and politics.					
agree	72.3%	Disagree	27.3%	participants	2100

The trend, however, reinforced in schools and media, as well as internal political developments, is for democratic, as opposed to traditional values. But the change will be slow as democratic values, favored in the abstract, interact with society's Confucian practices.

TABLE IX

PUBLIC ATTITUDES ABOUT FAILURE TO ELECT MORE IN 2000- NATIONAL SURVEY OF KOREAN ADULTS IN 1990 AND 2000 [8]-[9]

What do you think is the reason women candidates failed to make gains in the 13th (1988) election? – Women candidates could not win in 2000 (16th election) because:

response	1999	2000
<b>Women candidates lack ability</b>	<b>27.3%</b>	<b>18.8%</b>
Low qualification of voters		11.7%
Lack of nomination opportunities		7.0%
Lack of quotas for women candidates		5.3%
Prejudice of party leaders		2.0%
Woman candidates not well known	21.6%	
Voters did not like her party	23.4%	
Voters did not like her positions	3.8%	
Regional prejudice	4.8%	
<b>Social Prejudice against women</b>	<b>14.7%</b>	<b>44.6%</b>
Dk/Na	4.4%	10.6%
Total:	100%	100%

Today, it is understood that the social prejudice toward women's role is not the cause for women's failure in elections. In the 1980s, 1990s, when women were defeated in elections, the social prejudice was picked up, as the most important reason why they were defeated, popular belief that women would not be able to do politics, but in the 2000s, it is assumed that in general women can do politics as good as men, but these women candidates are less well-known, they are just less qualified than male counterparts.

It is observed some of these changes, comparing to popular explanations for the failure of women candidates to make gains in the 13<sup>th</sup> (1988) and 16<sup>th</sup> (2000) elections. In the 1990s and the 2000s there were few who said women candidates lacked ability. In 1990 a majority blamed social prejudice against women and voters' ignorance. In 2000 few took this view. Instead, the women candidates themselves were faulted as being of the wrong party, holding the wrong positions, being not well-known, or being from the wrong region [9]. Presumably, a well-known woman of the right party and holding the right views could win. While the reality is basically the same in 1990 and 2000, that is, few women were elected, the popular explanation had changed.

## B. Election System

There are two big groups in electoral system. The FPTP (First past the post) is good for electorate to choose directly whom they want, but except the winner, the ballots that the other candidates earned are not reflected in the allocation of parliamentary seats. Additionally, this system is favorable to a bigger party. The list PR represents exactly what the electorate wants, but electorates cannot select their representatives directly but they vote for lists that parties established. In the point of representation of social minorities, the PR is better which helps minority group to present in parliament. In the same way, in the PR, when a party establishes its list, it can consider to represent gender. Therefore women can more easily be represented. It is in Nordic countries where the electoral system is the PR that the women's representation is higher. Unsurprisingly, the electoral system helps to get more women in parliament.

Korean electoral system is primarily a single district member plurality system. This system is favorable to existing political elites, unfavorable to newcomer including women. Newcomer and women have difficulty to be nominated as candidates by party because of their uncertainty of being elected and also to win in elections because of their lack of resources and their nameless. Until 2000, the low representation of women in parliament was due primarily to the culture but also due to this electoral system. Until 2000, the Korean electoral system looked like a mixed system but it was basically a plurality system because the seats for the PR was distributed based on the ballots that parties earned from the plurality system. This system had raised a dispute about the violation of the constitution, especially against the article of the equality of the vote. In 2001, the constitutional court decided the violation of the constitution in this electoral system. In 2002, the electoral law changed to a two ballots system, a mixed electoral system like Bonn system. The system of before 2002, the one of after 2002 are different when parties establish party list. In the former system, parties did not pay attention to establish party list because electorate did not vote for party list. But in the new system, parties deliberate seriously popular opinion to establish party list because people vote for party list that allocates almost 15% of parliamentary seats. After 2002, parties deliberate the trend of popular opinion. Therefore, after 2002, parties have included more women in party list and we also introduced the quotas clause in the electoral law.

Before the 16<sup>th</sup> (2002) election the law was changed to stipulate 30% of the party's list must be women candidates. Then, before the 17<sup>th</sup> (2004) election the electoral law was changed again to require that parties nominate women to 50% of the lists and 30% of the district positions. Given that district nominations required success in a primary election and given women could be nominated in districts for which her party stood little chance, fulfilling the quota for the districts, much less increasing the proportions of women elected from districts, proved difficult. The list quotas proved workable and successful, however, with women being over 29% in 2000 and 50% of those elected from lists in 2004.

### C. Rise of Women's Conscience

In the 2000s, world widely, many women political leaders and women MP are seen everywhere. One may ask of all the days, why now? After WW2, women began to be educated in tertiary level and in the 1980s, in most western countries; women are enrolled as many as men in tertiary level. This brings also an increase of women's economic activities. Even though there is still a segregated employment structure, women work more in important social areas than before. In Korea, as women are educated more than before, and they work outside more than before, they are more interested in politics because in social life, in economic activities, they feel a sexual inequality in workplace which can be partly abolished by political efforts. As women become more sensible to their rights and social problems, they claim a more equal political participation. Their pressure pushes parties to recruit more women, and lead the change of the culture.

Between 1970 and 1990, women were enrolled more than 4 times as much in tertiary education while in primary and secondary education, the ratio was a little increasing. In 1990, the ratio of women to men was 53%, now in 2007, it rises up to 61%. It has been gradually increasing but still has way to go, comparing to Nordic countries which have about 100%, even higher than 100%. In economic life, women work gradually more than before. In 1994, 41% of active women worked, now 50.1% of active women population work. The ratio of women to men is also increasing little by little, from 38.7% to 46% in 2006.

TABLE X  
WOMEN'S EDUCATION [6], [10]

	primary	secondary	tertiary
Ratio 1990/1970	106	109	421
1990	100	97	53
Female/male			
2006	99	100	61
Female/male			

TABLE XI  
ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN [6], [11]

	Women working of ages 15+ women population	Women working to men working	Earned income(fem ale/male)
1994	41	52	38.7
2000	48.9	69.5	
2006	50.1	68	46

One cannot deny the efforts of UN for the development in women's social status. UN sets agenda for the enhancement of women's social status. Through various international meetings, UN pushes member states to make efforts to advance women's social status. What UN does is not limited to agenda settings and pushing member states. What is more important is that UN proclaims that women's social status has to be promoted, and that national effort to do this is a duty for member States. Therefore, national democrats and women's organizations can count on the legitimacy of the UN's working.

### V. CONCLUSION

South Koreans have barely had a decade of normal democratic political life. The society is strongly committed to

making a success of democracy, including establishing a strong place for women. Korea's mass media and schools stress democratic values and the need to provide equal opportunity for women. The government established and funds the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), a women's think tank. Non-governmental organizations such as the Korean League of Women Voters work for women's political access. Koreans are in the process of achieving a synthesis between being Korean and being democratic.

Electoral arrangements have been carefully studied over the past two decades. It is obvious how to advantage – and disadvantage – women candidates. Gains for women, however, are but one consideration. The desire for political gain and advantage is not confined to them. Yet the Korean political establishment has accommodated women with quotas and list proportional representation. Women scholars are turning their attention to the candidate selection system and primaries. Proposals for reform have been, and are being, developed.

There will be intense pressure for more action. Koreans are self-conscious about the political role of women and committed to change. They have a reputation of doing the difficult and making it look easy.

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