

Position of Women in Korea

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Political Status of Women

The Korean constitution recognizes the equality of men and women in political rights since 1948, year of the independence. Women have the right to participate in the elections and to be elected to all public offices, but their participation in political leadership and policy making is highly limited. From 1948 to 1985, only five women were appointed as ministers taking part in the administrative body of national politics and their tenures of offices were relatively short.

In the National Assembly, women members were in all 46 holding office between 1948 and 1981. At the general election of April 1988, 13 women applicants for the National Assembly membership failed to be elected by their regional constituencies.

In public offices, women officials count 132,429 (21.4%) out of a total of 619,227 persons. In the lower grades, the rates of women employees range between 6.2% and 21.2% but in the high ranking offices, nos. 1, 2 and 3, there are three women in all. Among local public officials above 5th grade, the number of women is 177 out of 16,623 (1.1%) according to statistics 1983.

Legal Status of Women

In 1960, the modern Civil Law was promulgated; it contained male-centered factors such as: 1) the head of the family should be a man. 2) A woman should put her name in her husband's family register when she gets married. 3) The husband's children, legitimate or not, can be recognized as his children but those of the wife may be recognized only when they are born by the present husband. 4) The paternal relatives have certain privileges over maternal relatives. Since 1945, women's organizations and other aid-centers for family relations have been sending petitions and suggestions regarding a just enactment of the new Civil Law. The family law was partially revised (1977). In 1983 the Korean Government signed the U.N. agreement for the Abolition of Discrimination against Women. Since then a campaign has been started by women's organizations in Korea, claiming the establishment of complete sexual equality in civil and family laws. In 1987, the Equal Employment Act for Male and Female was passed.

Economic Status of Women

The industrial growth of Korea since 1960 has favored the increased integration of women in the labor force but the majority of them are employed as unskilled laborers marked by low wages, low age and low education, while women in professional and administrative jobs are few. Statistical tables show that women in agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting and factory labor, form about 50% of employed women. Their hours of work are more than those of men and

their wages are much lower. Women professionals, administrators, technicians constitute 5.4% of the female labor force, while clericals are 10%.

Women's Organizations

Official statistics of 1983 show that there are about 60 women's organizations in Korea, with over 10 million members (South Korea has a population of more than 38 million). There are also many other organizations which are not registered with the government. The largest women's groups in the country are: 1) "The Korean National Council of Women" which has 24 women's associations registered as members in it. 2) "The Korean Association of Women's Organizations", established in 1987 and aiming at the integration of women's organizations into a more radical women's movement. The activities of women's organizations are varied, assertive and all embracing.

Women's Studies

Since 1977, more than 30 colleges/universities are offering women's studies courses covering various aspects of women's history, problems and concerns. Research work is conducted in many institutions, an M.A. degree program in Women's Studies was established at Ewha Women's University in 1982.

Family Planning

The family planning policy adopted in Korea since 1961 has received strong support from the government. Financial aid is provided by the government to both the middle and the lower class for the use of voluntary contraceptive aids. Emphasis is placed on men's contraception operation rather than women's. There is a subsistence support for the poor who have already taken the contraceptive operation: free medical treatment to the children of under-school age of parents who have only two children and expect to have no more because one of them has been operated. Other forms of encouragement to family planning are used by the government.

Violence and Women

Violence against women includes rape, prostitution, traffic of women etc. All these evils are being strongly fought by women's organizations, particularly a form of prostitution which has spread in Korea under the name of "Tourist Industry". Women are demanding a procedure to test foreign visitors with the aim of protecting Korean people from AIDS which threatens women's health and has caused world-wide tension in recent years.