

# Comparison of Women's Political Participation in Korea and China

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**Abstract**—This paper deals with the comparison of women's political participation in Korea and China. Korean women are participated more in higher education. As the economic development and the women's social participation can enhance the possibility of women's political participation in advanced democratic countries, in Asian countries such as Korea and China in which Confucianism prohibited women to participate in public life and the process of nation building is different from western countries, the political power takes an initiative to implement policies for women's participation in politics and for women's consciousness.

**Keywords**—Korea, China, women, political participation, quota, education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

RECENTLY, the World Bank reported that the society is less corrupted and has higher economic development when there is more equality between men and women [1]. This report indicates that the sex inequality is reducing the economic development capability for a country, not only by excluding women from economic activities and public services but also by excluding women as human resources. Therefore, we can say that gender equality will improve a national growth potential, permitting men and women enjoy their freedom to choose their proper lives and manage them for their own. Furthermore, generally speaking, women are more moralistic than men. Or women do not have any channel or network with which they can access corruption, so that a society of which more women work may be less corrupt than a society with less women. When we say that women's political participation must be enhanced, it is not only for women but also for the society itself.

As an industrialized society is transformed to an information society, people's demand and expectation is changed. People are concerned more with the politics of daily life which is related to enhance the quality of life, which is regarded more linked to women than to men as a political subject. Since the state policies influence individual lives, the lives of women are also affected by the politics. Therefore, women also have to participate in politics to assert women's interest in their lives.

While Korean politics is characterized by its high-cost and low efficiency structure, Koreans ask the political reform. Especially for new comer such as women it is not easy to access to politics. If the enhancement of women's political participation needs the change of culture which takes, we

should change political system which is favorable to women's political participation.

We will discuss firstly why women have to participate in politics. Next, the factors which influence to encourage women's participation in politics will be discussed. Then, the level of women's participation of two countries will be explained. And then, it will be suggested the role of government as one of crucial factors that help women to participate in politics especially in Asian countries.

## II. THE REASON WHY WOMEN HAVE TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS

It might be argued that participation in decision-making will be facilitated by women's advancement in other area, including education and formal economic activity. Yet, without their political participation, progress in the other areas may be slow since it is often dependent on resources that come from public sources. There is close reciprocal relationship between the general advancement of women and the participation of women in decision-making. Women's political participation will be enhanced if social and economic support structures exist, legal discrimination is eliminated and negative stereotypes are banished from education and the media. Increased participation by women in politics may be necessary for improved social, economic, legal and cultural conditions for women.

There are five basic arguments for the reason for the women's participation in decision-making [3]. The first argument is about democracy and egalitarianism. Women are numbered a little bit more than half of population and therefore must be represented proportionally. The consciousness of women's rights as full citizenship should be reflected in their genuine participation at all the states of political life. There cannot be true democracy where women are virtually excluded from positions of power.

The second argument is one of legitimacy. Women's under-representation can be dangerous for the legitimacy of the democratic system since it distances elected representatives from their electorate and more particularly from the women among their electors. The legitimate value of the outcome of political decision-making is thus not the same for both men and women. This final consequence may be that women refuse to accept laws and policies that have been drafted without their participation [4, p.51].

The third argument is of differences in interest. Political participation involves articulating, providing and defending interests. Women are conditioned to have different social roles, functions and values. It is reasonable to believe that women are

more aware of their own needs and are therefore better able to press for them. Women are more aware, for example, of the need to have control over their own bodies and therefore access to family planning; to have proper provision for the care of children and of others who are physically dependent; and to have more protection against sexual violence and harassment. The current composition of the political decision makers means that women are unable to articulate and defend their own interests.

The fourth argument is that of changing politics. There are some indications that women politicians, if there are enough of them, can change the focus of politics. Women are more critical of the traditional definition of politics. An initial effect of women entering the political scene was the enlargement of the scope of politics. Issues, such as, child care, sexuality and family planning, that were once confined to the private sphere are now seen as political. Some women have come to regard the decision-making process itself as being too centralized, too hierarchical and too technocratic.

The final argument is for the efficient use of human resources. No country can afford not to utilize all its human resources. Women comprise half the world's pool of potential talent and ability. The importance of their fundamental biological and social roles is clear, and though their paid and unpaid labor. Excluding women from positions of power and from elected bodies impoverishes public life and inhibits the development of a just society. In short, without the full participation of women in decision-making, the political process will be less effective than it can and should be, to the detriment of society as a whole.

### III. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS RELATED TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The above five arguments prove that women's participation in politics is very important not only for women themselves but also for their society and the strengthened democracy. However, in reality, we find that few women in politics is a world-wide phenomenon. At the same time, we can find out the diversity of level of women's participation in politics in each continent. According to modernization theory, women had been offered political, economic and social opportunities as traditional society was transformed to modern capitalist society with industrialization. After this transformation, women were liberated from the confinement of house and began to work as wage labour. Consequently, family relationship under the traditional patriarchal system needed to be changed. At the very beginning, women worked outside 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 same as men. They could find themselves in many problems such as their burden of life, their social status, and their unequal treatment. They recognized that the politics could solve these problems. Therefore, women have become more interested in politics. This is about the theory that economic development and women's economic participation bring about the increased

political participation of women. This theory says that women participate in politics more in advanced industrialized countries than in developing countries [6]. The more industrialized is a society, the more interested are women in politics. With regards to this, it can be suggested two economic indicators and one indicator for level of education, per capita gross domestic product (GDP), proportion involved in women's economic activities, the ratio of women to men in the enrolment in different levels of education [2, p.92]. GDP is a standard indicator of the wealth of a country. Development is measured in terms of it. Economic growth stimulates women to work outside and while they work outside, they get interested in politics. The educational opportunities make women understand social affairs and their rights therefore they get more interested in social equality between men and women.

TABLE I  
REGIONAL COMPARISON OF THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS  
[5]

Region	1990	2000
World	13	14
Nordic countries	34	39
Europe (Including Nordic Countries)	17	17
Americas	11	16
Asia	13	15
Sub-Saharan Africa	9	13
Pacific	5	13

Additionally, the will of government or the women's policy of government is worth to be mentioned. Even though the level of economic development of one country is not sufficient to raise women's political interest nor the educational opportunity offered to women does not reach to the satisfied level, women's participation in politics can be high if the governmental policy stresses women's emancipation, use of women as a labor force [7]. Therefore, in underdeveloped countries or developing countries, it will be more crucial the governmental policy orientation toward women, institutional support such as an affirmative action. We can find out this institutional, policy-level importance in the cases of Korea and China.

Here, it will be compared the proportion of women's economic activities between two countries rather than GDP since if compared the development of women's political participation in one country periodically, the GDP will be a crucial independent variable, however, in different countries, the GDP will not be a relevant variable. Secondly, it will be compared educational opportunities, and finally it will be shown governmental policy orientation and institutional support.

## IV. WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KOREA AND CHINA

## A. Korea

## 1) Economic Activities

TABLE II  
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES (%) [8]

	Economically Active Population		Participation Rate (%)		Unemployed		Unemployment Rate (%)	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Total	9397	13518	48.9	74.6	289	487	3.1	3.6
15-19	174	135	11.3	8.3	19	18	10.9	13.
20-24	1197	714	61.5	50.9	98	78	8.2	10.
25-29	1145	1623	60.5	82.7	46	123	4.0	7.6
30-34	1080	2106	49.8	94.7	31	72	2.9	3.4
35-39	1170	2012	58.2	95.2	28	50	2.4	2.5
40-44	1360	2044	64.0	94.8	26	45	1.9	2.2
45-49	1084	1670	61.5	92.8	20	37	1.8	2.2
50-54	711	1158	55.5	89.6	10	25	1.4	2.2
55-59	521	849	49.0	80.3	7	23	1.3	2.7
60+	955	1207	27.8	48.6	5	15	0.5	1.2

## 2) Educational Opportunities

Korean women's educational opportunities are similar to those of men's. Women increasingly enroll to university level educational institutions, in 1990 30.8%, in 2000, 65.5%. Men enroll to university level educational institutions 70.3% in 2000; therefore, the difference between men and women is only 4.8% [8].

TABLE III  
WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY (%) [8]

	Community college	University	Graduate school
2002	36.7	36.5	41.2
2005	37	36.8	44.2
2010	39.7	38	48.1
2015	40.4	40.1	48.7

## 3) Governmental Policies toward Women

Korean government defined its policy goal toward women including four aims:

1. To provide the social environment in which women can be free from domestic chores
2. To set in place institutional support for women's employment
3. To develop women's ability to work outside the home and their access to information
4. To strengthen the social milieu that discourages gender discriminatory practices and perceptions [9].

For the enhanced political participation, the government presented several policy strategies. First is setting a target percentage for women's participation in public service. It is a kind of an affirmative action added to the recruitment screening in 5th and 7th class (middle-level) public administration service and 5th class foreign service so as to increase the percentage of women recruits. The quota increased annually; 10%, in 1996,

13% in 1997, 15% in 1998, 18% in 1999 and 20% in 2000. Women's participation in various government committees would be increased to 30% by 2005[10]. It means to increase women's participation in decision-making process. Furthermore, in 2004 Korean government amended the law on political parties so that the quota of women for 50% of the proportional list can be implemented [11].

## 4) Women's Political Participation

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 IV  
YEARLY ELECTION OF MALE AND FEMALE CANDIDATES [12]

year	Single member		Two members		National List		All		f [%]	
	m	f	m	f	m	f	f	m		
	all		all		all		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 has a trend to increase successively, and since 1990's, there is a sudden take-off in the number of women MP. In 1970's, there was a relative high proportion of women MPs. 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 [2, p.1039]. This portion of parliamentary seats was to ensure the presidential party for the parliamentary majority. The military government nominated this part of MP to pro-governmental elites such as women professors, female medical doctors, and women leaders of interest groups. Therefore, they were typical 'token women', so that the government took advantage of them for the camouflage of the regime's non-democracy.

With the process of the democratization of the regime, the opportunity structure to access power became more widened. In 2000, just before the legislative election, the electoral law

changed to adopt the recommendation of the composition of 30% of women candidates in the party's list. In 2004, the electoral law changed again to stipulate the compulsion of the party list to contain 50% of women to 50% in the party list. In 2004, most parties observed this new electoral law so they reserved 50% of the list for women, and several parties put women even in odd numbers of their parties' lists, so called the zipper system. The new electoral law produced a new parliamentary appearance which had 13.4% of women.

A new environment spurred women politicians to have courage to run for elections. Since then, the number of women running for general elections has increased. Because of the resistance of family, the fear to be defeated and the deficiency of resources, women had hesitated to run for an election, but thanks to the new electoral laws favorable to women, women challenged an election more often.

TABLE V  
YEARLY NUMBER OF WOMEN CANDIDATES [13]

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

### B. China

Chinese women were long subject to oppressive situation in a feudal and subsequently, semi-feudal, semi-colonial society. With the introduction of western civilization, the Confucian perception on women was criticized. Especially while the communist revolution had processed, the active participation of revolutionary women helped to enhance women's status. It was not until the founding of the People's Republic of China that Chinese women got law's guarantee for men and women's equality.

The Chinese government wanted to have women participated in building of socialism. Until 1949, women increasingly extended their social activities including economic activities. Women had got to independent economic base, and while application of equal pay for equal work, women's wage would be an important source of household income. This improvement of women's economic status contributed women's political, social achievement.

#### 1) Education

Urban women in China complete an average of 9.97 years of schooling, with 56.3% completing their education at the senior middle-school or highest levels, 33.3% at the junior-middle school and 8.3% at the primary school level; only 2.1% are illiterate or semi-literate. The corresponding figures for rural women are 8.9%, 26.6%, 27.9%, 36.6% respectively.

TABLE VI  
WOMEN'S EDUCATION [14]

	Urban women	Rural women
Illiterate	2.1%	36.6%
Primary school	8.3	27.9
Junior-middle school;	33.3	26.6
High school	56.3	8.9

#### 2) Economic Activities

During the period of the eighth five-year plan (1991-1995), China's labour and employment structure underwent marked changes due to the rapid economic growth. These improvements were most evident in the increasing proportion of women in the work force. By the end of 1994, China had 270 million women employed, accounting for 44.8% of the total labour force and representing a slight increase over the 1990 figure of 44.6%. The government attaches great importance to women's employment, and as physical-strength requirements of jobs become less important with the widespread adoption of new technologies, more jobs becoming available or women [15, p.385].

During the period of the ninth five-year plan (1996-2000), China will pursue a policy of guidance and support, with the assistance of society at large, to encourage workers to seek employment structure in which workers rely mainly on large and medium-sized State-owned enterprises for employment. During that period, great effort will be made to develop workers' job skills and enhance the caliber of the labour market. This policy will also have a positive impact on women's employment rates as well as on the re-employment of laid-off workers.

#### 3) Government Policy

Chinese government policy toward women is characterized by three points. First of all, it is a reconsideration of the social perception on women [15, p.384]. It is developed with the critic about the Confucian concept of women. This policy focused on the breakdown on the traditional family system, women's equal rights, equality of educational opportunities, economic independence, autonomy on marriage etc. [16, p.69]. Secondly, the government organized the National Women's Union to enhance women's political participation. This Union's mission is to encourage women's social and political participation. It has been a center of activities to increase women's consciousness raising and of political training for women. Thirdly, since the government took a policy which aimed women's mobilization for the construction of socialism, the government socialized the domestic work therefore women could be liberated from domestic work. Furthermore, the equal pay law is enacted. In 1992, the law for guarantee of women's right was passed which proclaimed the equal right to elect and to be elected. For this equal right to be elected, the laws set up the quota for women deputies of NPC and Provincial People's Congress [16, p.65]. This quota is not first in the Chinese history. In 1990, the communist party ordered to provincial communist party organs to have at least one female cadre for each provincial party in five years. In 1993, the Eighth NPC

amended the constitution so that the State has to protect women's right and interest, implement equal pay for equal work, and train and recruit female cadres.

The Chinese women's political participation development owes these governmental policies.

#### 4) Political Participation

Mao Zedong often mentioned that "women hold up half the sky", so he is often regarded as the father of Chinese feminism. However, since the Chinese Communist Party took power from 1949, a single woman has not ever sat as one of the seven members in the Politburo Standing Committee; the highest and most powerful decision-making body in China. Still this situation is not changed yet and only one woman, State Councilor Liu Yandong, was even said as a potential candidate beforehand. The number of female members of the wider Politburo is also remarkably low, only 2 out of 25. The number of female Communist Party members is around 23% [17].

In the level of provinces, there is only one province among 22 provinces, Anhui province in the east, which is governed by a woman as governor, Li Bin. When the first National People's Congress (NPC) was held in 1954, there were 147 women deputies, accounting for 12% of the total. When the Eighth NPC was held in 1993, the number of women deputies had increased to 626, or 21.03% of the total. The Eight National committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) had 282 women deputies, or 13.52% of the total. At present China has three women ministers and 14 women vice-ministers in the central government, 23 women deputy provincial governors and 375 women mayors or deputy mayors of its more than 640 cities. China has also has one woman State Vice-President and honorary State President, as well as women Vice Premiers and two women State Councilors.

TABLE VII  
WOMEN'S DEPUTIES IN NPC [16, p.68]

	Total	Women	Percentage
1954	1226	147	12.0
1959	1226	150	12.2
1964	3040	542	17.8
1975	2885	653	22.6
1978	3497	742	21.2
1983	2978	632	21.2
1988	2978	634	21.3
1993	2978	626	21.0
1998	2979	650	21.8

#### V. CONCLUSION

Korean women are offered more educational opportunities than Chinese women and in economic activity, Korean women work outside a little bit more than Chinese women. However, in political participation, Chinese women participate much higher than Korean women since 1950s. These differences are not from social, economic factors rather they come from governmental policy orientation toward women. Recently Korean government also adopted the quota for women in

general election and local election. After the implementation of this quota, the number of women deputies is doubled and in local assemblies, many of women councilors are elected due to the quota. In China, they adopted it earlier than Korea and the Chinese women's policy is formed at the very beginning of the foundation of the Chinese People's Republic. Due to such efforts, Chinese women can participate actively in politics since 1950s.

While the economic growth and the women's social participation can provide a favorable condition for women's political participation in western countries, in Asian countries such as Korea and China where Confucian culture hindered women from public life and the process for nation building is quite different to western countries, government takes an initiative to promote women's participation in politics and raises women's consciousness, even supports them with institutional provisions.

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