Women in Local Politics - The Korean Case*

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1. Male dominated society and weak political empowerment of women

The Confucian tradition has turned Korea into an extremely male-dominated society. According to the traditional way of thinking, it used to be said that girls in their childhood obey their father, and in their matrimony obey their husband and in their old ages obey their sons, and that a hen's (=women) outcry would bring an entire family collapse. The traditional division of role according to gender has been accepted as being sufficiently natural, women staying home while men were engaged in economic and social activities in the fields. The chances given to women are still limited to temporary works and earning income merely contributory to the husband's. Thus, women are being discriminated against in many aspects, in employment, promotion and wages. For instance, the 1997 statistics show that female workers were paid merely 61 percent of the male wages in the same job.

The education level of Korean women is quite high, the average year of schooling being 9.37 years. But, only 48.1% of women participate in the economic activities. Under these circumstances, the number of women in "public positions" participating in the policy-making process is extremely small. At present, there is only one female minister in the cabinet, and

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not a female vice-minister in Korea. Also, Korea has only one female ambassador, and 16 high-ranking public officials of grade three or higher, making up only 0.03% of the total. Further, women hold only eleven seats in the National Assembly, making up only 3.7% of the body of 299 members in total.

As of 1999, not a single woman has been elected as provincial governor, nor a mayor or county head in Korea. In the local council for large municipal units, there are 41 female councilors, a mere 5.9% of the total number of 690, while in the elementary-level assemblies, e.g., cities, counties and wards there are only 56 women out of 3,489, which amounts only to 1.6 percent.

In 1998, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) announced that in terms of Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), an index showing women's participation in politics and other decision-making positions in professional domains, Korea ranked 83rd of the 102 countries surveyed. In a 1997 report on the degree of women's political participation published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Korea ranked 94th among 107 countries. Among the 22 Asian countries surveyed, Korea ranked 19th, making up the bottom tier.

2. The local autonomy of Korea, restored in 1991

The history of Korea's local autonomy goes back only a short period of time. It was first implemented in 1952, only to be suspended by the military governments. It was only in 1991 that local autonomy was restored in Korea.

In the 1991 local elections, only 48 females were included in the 5,170 successful contenders who won the election, making up 0.9% - not even a whole 1%. This was a result of the women and civic groups' lack of attention to local council elections at that time. As the women's organizations had been concentrating on democracy movements and legislative reforms geared toward the central government, they had relatively small interest in local politics.

With the launch of the democratic government, however, people began to awake to their desire for improved living standards, calling for amelioration in a variety of areas including the quality tap water, waste disposal, school environment, transportation and food safety. All these issues constitute everyday concerns of women, and the role of the local autonomy is to address these issues in the policy-making process and to make budgetary appropriations for them.

With such realization, women's groups in Korea, in particular Korea Women's Associations United (KWAU), began to make preparations for the local elections of 1995 in order to
accomplish the important task of expanding women's participation in local councils. 17 female candidates were selected, trained and given support in their election campaigns for the 1995 local elections, and as a result, as many as 14 of them succeeded in getting elected. I participated actively and deeply in this process as a representative of KWAU. The following section gives a more detailed account of this case.

3. A success story - choosing qualified candidates, assisting their election campaigns, and getting them elected

First, a brief introduction of KWAU: created in 1987, KWAU is a federation of 28 member organizations who have a strong sense of solidarity among them, and currently has five branches. KWAU, led by dedicated activists, is strongly committed not only to the promotion of women's rights but also to the implementation of democracy and reunification movements. Each year, KWAU designates a priority project to be promoted by all its member organizations, who pursue this central project in parallel with their individual projects.

1) Since 1993, KWAU has maintained the position that participation in local autonomy was a key to the promotion of women's rights and democracy. It decided to expand the focus of its movement to address the everyday demands of women in local communities, encompassing such areas as environment, education and consumer protection, and decided to monitor and assess how these issues were handled by the local councils, and to announce the results to the public.

2) With the 1995 local elections coming up, KWAU made the priority project for 1994-1995 "local autonomy and expansion of women's political participation".

3) It was decided that each member organization of KWAU should "unearth" one or more qualified female candidate, for which a period of six months were given. As a result, a total of seven organizations were able to put forward 17 candidates in total. In the process of finding the candidates, many lessons were be learnt, including the following:

- How come only seven organizations were able to produce candidates?

Women Link produced the largest number of candidates. This was because Women Link was the first organization to launch grass-roots movements that have now taken root in the local communities. This indicates that elections are likely to be successful only when acknowledged and accepted by the residents of the local community through activities that have effectively taken root in that community.
- It was not easy for the candidates to make the decision to run in the election.

The biggest hurdle for the candidates was that they first had to persuade their families, especially their husbands, for their consent. For example, a candidate in Taejon with excellent qualifications had to give up her candidacy because of the strong opposition she faced from her husband. On the other hand, candidates with active support of their husbands found it easy to carry out election campaigns.

- The biggest concerns for the candidates were money and electioneering.

As such, KWAU encouraged the candidates by promising them to provide support in this regard. Without such support, it would have been impossible for the 17 candidates to run in the elections.

4) The member organizations which fielded candidates made a special decision; they decided to halt all other activities during the one-month election period so that all the members became election campaigners - a decision that provided huge electioneering support.

5) KWAU established fund-raising headquarters to carry out fund-raising activities for the candidates. It also provided the money for the candidates' registration of their candidacy with the election management commission.

6) In addition, KWAU provided a political training program for the candidates and key election workers in order to prepare them for the actual election, covering in detail various areas including speeches, image-making, make-up and clothing. Of course, education was also provided on election law and election campaign strategies, including tips on which voter groups to designate as target groups. A long-time lecturer of election campaigns for a political party praised that the training provided by KWAU was in fact better than that of political parties.

7) Above all, KWAU negotiated with political parties to help the candidates get party nomination where this was expected to provide the candidates with an advantage in their electioneering. There were heated internal discussions over whether KWAU, being a civic organization, should field an independent candidate or get party nomination, and in the event that it was decided to attain party nomination, over whether to open the nomination to all parties or select the party closest in policy line to KWAU. Consequently, it was decided that
party nomination would be attained only from one opposition party with the policy line closest to that of KWAU.

8) On the election day, 14 of the 17 candidates successfully won their bid to become local representatives. Though this number was small, without the candidates produced by KWAU, the total number of females elected would have stood at a mere 86.

4. Demand for the quota system in the large-unit local councils to women

On top of helping the candidates participate in the elections, KWAU, together with other women's groups, called for the introduction of a quota system to impose a 10% quota on the number of seats going to women in the large-unit local councils. The result was that 10% of the seats were allocated for proportional representation, albeit not just for women. In the 1995 and 1998 elections, women's groups called for the allocation of 50% of the proportional representation tickets to women. However, this was not carried out by the political parties, and women only accounted for 43.2% of the proportional representation seats. In 1998, the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP) and the New Korea Party (NKP) nominated women candidates for 40% and over 50% of their proportional representation tickets respectively. However, the total percentage of those elected was a mere 36.4%, or 27 out of the total number of successful female candidates for the local councils.

5. Conclusion - Tasks for strengthened women's participation in local politics

1) The key to promoting women's political participation is to ensure a large number of women's participation on the local council level.

2) Active movements should be launched to help women's movement take root in the local communities, ensuring the cultivation of female leadership in this process.

3) Special measures should be taken by the political parties in order to foster women's political leadership. (eg. Emily's Fund of the U.S. Democratic Party)

4) A proportional representation system should be implemented whereby 50% of the seats earned through this system should be given to women. This should be specified by law.

5) Women's organizations charged with the expansion of women's political participation should be promoted. These organizations would be charged with finding qualified women candidates and providing them with training and support, as well as providing training programs for the voters.
6) Education programs should be established in order to eliminate the discriminatory mindset against women and to inform the public at large that women's participation in politics is an important yardstick for the development of democracy.