

THE ROLE OF WOMEN POLITICIANS IN PROMOTING THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY:

FOUR YEARS EXPERIENCE AS A LAWMAKER

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1. Necessity of women's participation in politics

Since the time of Korea's national liberation in 1945, the inauguration of an anti-democratic government supported by foreign forces, several coup d'etat by military regimes and the subsequent suppression of human rights for the maintenance of political power have made up the modern political history of Korea. In this context, politics has been understood by most people, especially by women, as a seesaw game to grasp the political control. However, politics in its true sense is the task of creating people's living condition, a process of making efforts to enhance the quality of life. Therefore, women who comprise more than half of the total population should themselves be involved in politics to secure the social realities which will improve their own living conditions. However, politics in Korea has long been monopolized by men, thoroughly isolating women, leaving them as a peripheral group in the political sphere.

The degree of democracy of a society can be evaluated by the way women are treated in that society and by the social conditions for women's to work. A political structure in which the issues of women's lives are not seriously considered obviously contradicts the democratic philosophy. At the same time, the realization of democracy cannot be achieved without solving the problem of the representation of women. In this regard, the society as a whole should make effort to secure women's right to life-long equal work and to the realization of a life with human dignity. Women themselves need to actively participate in the political structure to achieve such goals. These are women's rights as well as their historical obligations.

The reasons for women's participation in politics include firstly, the fact that women, who are more than half of the population, should naturally be represented. Women should be able to share in creating

their own living conditions. Secondly, in the policy making process/for enhancing the quality of life,/women's participation/is needed for their inclination towards/respect for life and a human-centered way of thinking. Thirdly, with their higher level of morality,/women may improve/the current political environment/in which mammonism and power prevail. By forming a new power group,/women can contribute to changing/the present undesirable trend in politics.

The challenge on Korea today/is how women can organize themselves/into a political force/despite the long oppression of sexist institutions and cultural tradition.

2. Present political situation of Korean women

Through the evolution of the women's movement in Korea, the political awareness/and participatory capabilities of Korean woman/have made remarkable progress. From the late 1970s through the 1980s/and even/up to the present,/the experience of persistent participation/in various social movements/as well as the democratization movement/has provided a solid foundation/for a women's political movement. Meanwhile, the legislative achievement/in the last National Assembly session/and ^{the} participation/in the local and provincial council/assembly elections -- which were revived after 3 decades-- were good opportunities/for practical experience/in woman's political participation. Such experiences/activated arguments on participation in institutional politics/within women's movement groups. Women came to perceive/quite objectively/their own political capabilities/and limitations/through such experiences. It is deplorable, however, that despite the increasing participation/or will to participate/on the part of women in general in various elections,/the activities and perception/do not systematically converge into the formulation/a political force through/an unified movement process. The fact that only a minority of women's movement forces/is joining on the discussion/on women's participation in politics/demonstrates that the women's movement in Korea/has yet to take root in the lives of grassroots women.

When we look at the election campaign scenes,/we see that women are indispensable,/as they are the majority/not only of the audience/but of the campaign activists. The problem is that such participation of women,/however, does not have any influence/on the policy making for women. As a result, a handful of women political leaders/are required to play multiple roles -- not only as lawmakers or

lobbyists in the National Assembly and the party but also as political educators to the general public, as bridges between organizations and political institutions and as organizing activists within the political party. The present situation in Korea, however, does not allow them to fulfil such roles effectively.

One major problem is that women who have long been excluded from the political arena are in a very unfavorable position to compete equally with their male partners. The second problem is money. Politics is a job requiring much money, and the current atmosphere makes it difficult for women to fund their activities. Thirdly, the political foundation ^{for women} is still weak. We can trace this problem back to the process of women politicians' advancement into the political arena where the claims of the women's movement are often neglected. As a result, no support forces are formed for women political leaders. This makes women cynical about politics as they see there is no chance to realize the changes politics might make in their lives. Consequently, there is no expectation among women that their rights could be extended through political participation.

The political situation in the initial stage of the last National Assembly, in which opposition parties enjoyed a stronger influence with a majority over the ruling party, was a victory for the people after their persistent democratization movement. A turning point was marked for women to have a new perspective on political participation when women political leaders and women's organizations achieved landmark success in their legislative efforts. After 37 years of painstaking efforts, the Family Law which had long oppressed Korean women was amended, while the Equal Employment Act was also revised to become a more practical law rather than a nominal regulation. A legal foundation was provided for the support of day care centers by means of the government's budget. Separate recruitment of government officials was prohibited, a women minister was nominated to the second general affairs ministry, the Home Welfare Section was upgraded to the Home Welfare Bureau and women's participation in the administration was expanded.

All these achievement became possible thanks to the joint efforts of women political leaders, women's organizations, women journalists and male legal experts who truly believed in democracy, plus some male politicians who were sensitive to women voters. Among these groups, the role of women's organizations was the most critical. It was

unfortunate that women politicians could not overcome the barriers of their respective parties even in the cause of women's issue. One result of this was the failure to adopt a quota system for women in the local council elections law. Of course it was quite encouraging for us to achieve advancement in women's politics through policy reforms in the assembly and to speed up the awareness and necessity of women's participations in politics.

However, it should be noted that the number of women lawmakers actually decreased in the present National Assembly. In the last general election, ^{in 1988} only 14 women candidates ran in their constituencies and 19 ran in the latest elections. In both cases no woman candidate was successful. Among the proportional national representatives, the number decreased from six to three, occupying just 1% in the assembly. (10 women lawmakers in the 9th assembly (4.6%); 8 in the 10th (3.5%); 9 in 11th (3.3%); 8 in 12th (2.9%); 6 in 13th (2.0%); 3 in the 14th (1.0%)) This reality indicates that both women themselves and the men who dominate the politics are seriously responsible. Proper counter-measures should be taken to change the forces at work.

3. Prospects of organizing Korean women into a political force

The constitution defines the equality of men and women in many phrases, but such phrases are not implemented in various institutions and practices of the society. It is true that women are not yet fully capable of exerting their political awareness in the form of practical influence. In this regard, women political leaders are required to give priority in their activities to women's issues, beyond the partisan interests, while braving the possible criticism that they are too much inclined to women's cause.

Through my experiences in the National Assembly over the past four years, I have learned that male lawmakers are, without exception, conservative on women's issues regardless of whatever progressive political ideology they may have. They do not have a fundamental awareness of the issues facing women. Therefore, women politicians who take part in party activities need to carry through the interests of women within the decision-making process of the party. Women need to demonstrate interest steadily and incessantly and must do follow-up. This is not an easy task. The double dilemma I have suffered is that I was not only in the minority as a woman but I was a member of a

minority party, where the majority prevailed. One advantage I had was that I belonged to the supreme decision-making body of my party. Because I was within that final decision-making core, I could easily link women's policies and legislation. Women political leaders in Korea need active support from women groups, who are the very root of their existence. Not only women politicians themselves but their male colleagues as well should realize that the women politicians are not alone. When this is realized, a minority of women political leaders will be able to achieve the demands of half of the population within the political community. That is, by then, male politicians will have come to regard the voice of women politicians as the voice of all women. When women political leaders have the firm confidence that they are the very representatives and the window of women, they will be able to better fulfil their role in promoting and advancing women's status.

As local autonomy takes root further in Korea, opportunities for political participation and experience for women are expected to increase, and in turn more women political leaders will be created. Expectations are high as the role of women politicians expanded. This will be not only in legislation on women-related issues but in other areas such that educational activities for women's leadership training, revising various institutions such as changing the election law to enable election campaigns without spending much money, thus enabling women's entry into the assembly and the organization of women into a political force. In doing so, changes can come to the current practice of trumpeting colorful women's policies only during the campaign period. A current attitude in leadership training programs for women is objectifying them as election campaigners rather than considering them as subjects in politics. To avoid such problems, the political participation of more capable women plus the active involvement by women's movement organizations are essential.

Women's movement organizations, in their part, should stop their practice of just launching one-time campaigns on women's participation during the elections. They should plan and carry out ongoing, regular strategies for the National Assembly. Recently, institutes such as the Center for Korean Women & Politics have been set up for the study and education of the ways and means of women's participation in politics, and women's policies. It is also encouraging that means of political participation have become part of the routine programs of women's organizations, although they are not yet fully satisfactory. Highly careful and systematic preparation and planning is needed so

that the general public is informed of the process of legislative efforts and are encouraged to participate actively.

4. Challenges for Korean women political leaders

There are a number of tasks concerning women which aim to improve their living conditions and which can be realized through making policies and creating institutions. One of these is the enactment of the Special Law on Sexual Violence, as a measure to cope with increasing sexual crimes. However, it is time that women political leaders go beyond the tasks which are identified as women's problems.

When we take into account the fact that no political issues is separate from the life of women, women political leaders should contribute to the enhancement of all people's living by strengthening the human aspect of politics through their expertise and professionalism in various political fields.

The role of women political leaders in Korea, where the government's pursuit of quantitative development and growth-oriented policies over the past three decades has resulted in the anti-life phenomenon, should be expanded in the important environmental and welfare areas.

Education, economy and national unification -- all these issues call for active participation by women politicians. Such participation will be a way to improve the political climate of the nation as well as to promote women's status.

Lastly, let me add one more point as we are gathered internationally here. If we agree that the political reality of Korean women is by means a unique problem for Korea alone but one which is shared across the world, to differing degrees, I would like to propose that we may pool our wisdom to solve our common problems, to utilize our solidarity to promote a competition among nations to come out with better policies concerning women, in the way that we have promoted the competition among the various political parties, within our domestic setting, for the advancement of women's status.

Thank you very much