

# KOREAN WOMEN: YOU HAVE COME A LONG WAY

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Confucianism has influenced gender roles more than any other factor in Korean society. Traditionally, women's roles were limited to household matters, and young girls were taught to prepare for their future roles as wife and mother. After South Korea was established as the Republic of Korea in 1948, however, women achieved constitutional rights for equal opportunities to gain access to public education and to work outside the home. The traditional roles of women have been fading gradually. Today's Korean society is not as dominated by Confucianism as it was in the past, but those traditions are still prevalent. Modern Korean women are challenged with multiple tasks as women are entering the work force in increasing numbers. In addition to being wage earners, they are expected to bear the lion's share of child rearing and housekeeping duties. Korean women play a pivotal role in family support structure and are often overburdened with obligations and expectations.

## Current Reality of Korean Women

A study by the World Economic Forum in 2005 revealed that Korea ranked 54<sup>th</sup> among 58 major countries for the empowerment of women, far behind other Asian countries. China ranked 33<sup>rd</sup>, followed by Japan in 38<sup>th</sup> place. Malaysia came in 40<sup>th</sup>, while Thailand and Indonesia ranked 44<sup>th</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup>, respectively. The most noticeable category was economic opportunity for women, where Korea ranked 55<sup>th</sup>.

Despite the passage of equal employment opportunity legislation in 1987, few women work as company executives, and they are still being disadvantaged in hiring and promotion decisions.

According to a survey by an online job search site in Korea, 57.5% of 573 female workers surveyed said that they experienced discrimination based on gender while looking for a job. More than 80% responded that they were discriminated against when it came time for a promotion, and nearly 50% said that promotion beyond a certain point is virtually impossible.

The biggest burden for Korean women is childcare. Working mothers often carry out double or triple responsibilities with respect to children, home, and job. From the point of view of the employer, these are the very reasons to avoid female employees, especially married women. To encourage more female participation in the workplace, the government introduced a maternity protection law in 1987, granting pregnant women 90 days leave with pay and their right to return to work. But this provision is not effectively enforced, and many companies violate it by paying only partial compensation or not paying at all. In addition, companies with more than 300 female employees are required to set up an on-site day care center, but there is no penalty for employers who fail to offer such services. Steps taken by the government give the impression that Korea is moving toward gender equality in the workplace, but thus far the changes in reality have been much slower than the changes in the legal system.

Wage discrimination is another major obstacle for Korean women in the workplace. It is an unfortunate reality for many women around the world. Reasons for the disparity vary, including differences in education, experience, and tenure, but a major factor is gender discrimination. However, the pay gap is improving by small increments. The average working woman earned 42% of what a man made in comparable jobs during the 1970s, but the gap had narrowed to 63% by 2002. The old-boy's network is another impediment to women's advancement in the workplace. Most companies still value and depend on whom you know rather than an individual's qualifications. In the male-oriented corporate world, most Korean women are not a part of the inner circle of male business executives.

	Overall Rank	Economic	Economic	Political	Educational	
Health and Attainment	Well-being		Participation	Opportunity	Empowerment	
China	33	9	23	40	46	36
Indonesia	46	29	24	46	53	29
Japan	38	33	52	54	26	3
<b>Korea</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>27</b>
Malaysia	40	40	36	51	32	15

Source: World Economic Forum

## **Is the Glass Ceiling Breakable?**

Despite these barriers, Korean women are gaining significant roles in society and have made remarkable achievements. Since the late 1990s, more women are entering government and politics. Korea recently welcomed its first female Prime Minister, and it may even witness the first woman to be nominated by a major party to run for president in the 2007 race. The former first female Minister of Justice announced that she is running for Mayor of Seoul in the May 31 election. The 17<sup>th</sup> National Assembly election in 2004 saw the percentage of female lawmakers rise to double digits, 13%, for the first time. Currently, 40 out of 299 lawmakers are women. Women are still underrepresented, but there has been a significant improvement from the 17 women in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 11 in the 15<sup>th</sup>, and 6 in the 14<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

Although women are still a minority in the corporate world, the numbers are increasing as they demonstrate outstanding abilities. LG Electronics began promoting women to executive level positions in 2001, and more than 15% of female workers at LG CNC are mid-to-upper level executives. In 2004, 23% of the total hires at SK were women, an increase from 8% in 1995 and 19% in 2000. Women are assuming positions in areas once considered men's territory. Currently, 5% of Hyundai and Kia Motors R&D researchers are women, and the company plans to increase the number to 20% by 2010.

The increasing presence of women has made the government realize that it must develop new policies for women. The most significant development has been the abolishment of the Hoju system or Family Registry System, which has been under fire as a patriarchal, gender discriminatory system since its enactment in 1958. The current patriarchal family registration system requires all family members to register under the male family head, or hoju. Under the revised law, however, children will be able to adopt a family name from the mother's side upon the parents' agreement, although it still encourages families to follow the father's side. Children of divorced or remarried parents will be allowed to change their original surnames to their mother's or stepfather's.

## **Female Labor Participation Critical to Economy**

According to the National Statistical Office, the number of Korean women participating in the economy surpassed 10 million for the first time in June 2005. This figure represents 51% of Korean females, up from 39% in 1970. It is also reported that one out of five Korean women became the breadwinners for their households as more women become engaged in professional jobs. Women's role is growing socially and economically. But Korea may need to do more to improve working conditions for women.

With the world's lowest birth rate and a rapidly aging population, Korea must mobilize this underutilized resource. By 2020 Korea will be 1.52 million workers short, as the economically active population will steadily dwindle. As it stands, the nation's maximum growth potential will fall to as low as 0.7% in 2040 from 2.9% in 2020 and 4.6% in 2000. The issue of gender inequality is not just important to women but is of economic urgency for Korea as it moves toward the status of an economically advanced nation and if it wishes to continue to achieve solid growth.