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“Gender, Politics, and Citizenship in South Korea: Reflections on Female Involvement in Electoral Competitions. Scope and Perspectives”

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Abstract

This paper reflects on female involvement in the current South Korean political scene, reassessing theoretical contributions in terms of the relationship among *gender, politics, and citizenship*, as well as the fundamental historical background used to approach the topic. The main purpose is to analyze women’s presence and status in the Korean political sphere throughout the 20th century, with a focus on the parliamentary electoral experiences.

Firstly, we will take a theoretical approach to women, private spaces, and the public world, in addition to the specific place of women in the political sphere. As a starting point, we will consider the (re)appropriation of the modern Western theories of the State and the citizenship by the Korean intellectual circles based on their philosophic and ideological traditions (Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.) Secondly, we will describe, in broad outline, the historical development of women’s political representation from the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 to the early 2000, focusing on the levels and forms of involvement in the institutional political sphere. In the following pages, we will analyze the case of the parliamentary elections held in 2004 and 2008, as both events show important aspects to construe the subject matter chosen. During this period, the female political involvement –articulated in the recognition of economic, political, and social rights-, loomed increasingly large.

The final thoughts highlight the importance of the growing involvement of women in the struggle for equal rights, and point out the notion of individual and citizenship underlying their concrete political practices. We believe that, coincidental with what happened in Western societies, the Korean political field was built based on an incomplete model: it is an androcentric model with unquestioned legitimacy. In order to explain the political and institutional processes of the different societies over the past decades, as well as to contribute to the creation of a new feminist epistemology, it is essential to establish this debate in the academic field.

Introduction: Gender, Politics, and Citizenship

In connection with the concepts of State and citizenship derived from modern age, the main idea we intend to highlight is that these concepts were developed at the heart of a patriarchal non-egalitarian political and cultural project. In turn, this hegemony of liberal and patriarchal values was structured based on two separate and independent spheres: the public and the private spheres¹. Each of these spheres related to specific roles (of men and women) that took part in the creation of cultural models and social stereotypes which tended to replicate the male/female binarism. Thus, the differentiation between the public and the private spheres has been reduced to the differentiation between women's household and private world and men's public and political world, a situation legitimated by showing it as natural and inherent to human relationships (Jelin, 1998.) However, this is not about mere assumptions, but about a social construction process which has historically grown stronger as an androcentric culture.

Cultural values and patterns bear within and, in turn, propose a model of subject based on objectivity and neutrality. According to this, men are associated with what is objective, universal, abstract, rational, and literal, in addition to productive work, i.e., with the public sphere and the State. In contrast, women are identified with a series of qualities whose cognitive value is played down by culture: what is subjective, specific, concrete, emotional, and metaphoric, as well as with the reproductive work, i.e., attributes related to the private sphere and the family. This is the role distribution which has established the social roles supporting a state logic where white men -owners- are shown as free equal subjects holders of citizen rights, and where women are disposed of this series of attributes, excluding them from both the public world and politics². It is based on this man/woman, public/private, State/family binary scheme that the sex/gender inequalities further legitimize to the present day.

The definition of modern political philosophy draws the relationship between citizens and the State posing citizenship as a condition inherent to individuals. But only a limited group of subjects has the merit system to participate in the social contract and, by ensuring the exercise of their political rights, half the human gender –women- is excluded. Due to the above listed qualities, women are regarded as unfit for the full exercise of their citizenship. An example of this is the massive participation of women in the so-called “new social movements” and non-governmental organizations during the ‘80s. These channels to express both female and feminist demands and claims evidence the choice of

¹ The roots of the division between the public and the private spheres can be traced back to the origins of Greek philosophy and reassembled based on the Universalist discourse of contractualists, which has aroused many expectations in women (Maffia & Rietti, 2007.)

² Such exclusion finds legitimization mechanisms both in those who exclude and in those who are excluded from the different participation channels (Maffia & Rietti, op. cit.)

political action mechanisms different from political parties –regarded as the traditional form of representation. This becomes a form of response in view of the weight of a culture with male predominance where we can notice the lack of women’s progress –as compared to men- in the public sphere, particularly in the field of institutional politics. Women do not hold outstanding political positions, or do hold them on certain conditions which conceal their own identity. The underlying reason is that politics is preserved as a patriarchal institution, dragging women to the “male territory” as a condition for their acceptance and organic inclusion into the political and moral system. In many cases, conflicts arise, but women are gradually embracing the traditional patterns and predominant values. Moreover, this argument can be reaffirmed by pointing out that reluctance to the continuance of women in those positions decrease if they have a disciplined behavior which does not jeopardize the current power assumptions and relations.

In the Western world, the replication of the androcentric prejudice was legitimated not only by the liberals-contractualists, but also by the most radical schools of thought, such as Marxism, and the different left-wing factions. Based on dissimilar and opposing ideological stances, the sexual division of labor and gender roles has become naturalized in the different historical and political contexts. The feminist critical thinking emerged in the face of liberalism and socialism –understood as the two big antagonistic models of the 20th century political philosophy.

Leaving differences aside, feminism has managed to build some consensus when it comes to denouncing the presence of a patriarchal ideology with historical continuity and broad, comprehensive geopolitical anchoring. In contrast, the proposal of contemporary feminism was based on the need to create a liberating political philosophy which challenges patriarchy as an ideological form promoting and replicating sex/gender inequalities. The question has revolved around the characteristics of the subject of politics that takes shape within the framework of patriarchal culture, and the purpose of the challenge was to make a statement about the place taken by women in this social context. Only the “second-wave”³ feminism managed to firmly set up and empowered the women’s right issue as part of the human rights. In turn, it demanded women’s rights to be regarded taking into account the diverse and specific conditions of the female universe.

While this dichotomic thinking and action scheme referred to cannot be extrapolated to the Asian world –it even shows variations by different local contexts-, we cannot assert that this part of the world was left out of certain assumptions which shaped such social scheme. Reflections on the modern Korean State gather dichotomic ways of thinking that agree on pointing out the naturalization of women’s social position as a result of the political pacts made in modern age scenarios.

³ Some basic texts about “second-wave” feminism: Einsenstein, Zilla (1980.) *Patriarcado capitalista, feminismo socialista*. Mexico: Editorial Siglo XXI; Firestone, Shulamite (1973.) *La dialéctica del sexo*. Editorial Kairos; Rowbotham, Sheila (1977.) *Mundo de hombre, conciencia de mujer*. Editorial Debate Fernando Torres; Rubin, Gayle (1986.) *El tráfico de mujeres: notas sobre la economía política del sexo*. *Nueva antropología*. Vol. VIII, No.30, among others.

In its adjustment to the modern Western world, South Korea faced a process in which it combined new aspects with elements from the philosophical and ideological schools of thought (Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) that have influenced the social spheres and the fields of learning throughout history⁴. Thus, the (re)appropriation of the modern theories of the State and citizenship took place hand in hand with traditions –mainly interacting with Confucianism rules and postulates. Confucian principles and values -understood as the constituent matrix of the traditional forms of social organization and dynastic State- were established based on a patriarchal system which organized social hierarchies and roles, setting a division between the public and the private spheres, thus replicating the (male/female) binarism associated with each social sphere.

Therefore, all peculiarities included, at the turn of the modern age, South Korea has updated its values and practices based on an essentially androcentric model in terms of the conception of the subject and the exercise of citizenship. Additionally, and as part of this complex process, the South Korean society has gradually taken different contributions resulting from feminist thinking. However, feminism theoretical statements should also be considered within the framework of the local female and feminist traditions and background, which give the Korean case distinctive characteristics vis-à-vis the West⁵. Next, we will focus on the political role of women in terms of the purposes of this paper.

Women and Political Representation: Background and Track Records

The demand for gender equality is not just an individual but a political problem related to the State. In pursue of this recognition, the increased female political representation is in line with the search of radical changes that would modify the social, economic, educational, and legal spheres in order to bridge the man/women inequality gap from “within” of the state machinery.

In the Republic of Korea, the attempts to enter the institutional politics arena began in 1948, during Rhee Syngman’s administration. Back then, a woman was elected to hold a seat in the National Assembly for the first time. The following parliamentary elections showed virtually zero increase in female participation, reaching a total of 3 seats in the 1958 elections. Within the executive branch, Rhee’s administration appointed three women -Yim Yong-sin, Pak Hyon-suk, and Kim Whal-ran- to hold ministry positions (Park, Kyung-ae, 1999: 433.)

⁴ Kim, Yung-chung (1977.) *Women of Korea: a history from ancient times to 1945*. Seoul. Ewha Womans University Press. Mera, Carolina (2004.) Reflexiones acerca de los cambios en la mujer coreana: Corea y Argentina. In C. Mera (comp.) *Estudios Coreanos en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Al Margen. Sobre confucianismo y modernidad en Corea del Sur puede consultarse: Romero Castilla, Alfredo (2004). Ética confuciana y modernización de Corea del Sur. In C. Mera (comp.) *Estudios Coreanos en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Al Margen.

⁵ The history of Korean feminism and the influences it received from the Western feminist thinking will be addressed in a future paper.

However, this early and unusual inclusion of women in the political arena related to their personal track records and merits, as they were the leaders of the resistance movement against the Japanese occupation⁶.

With Park Chung-hee military coup d'état, women vanished from the executive positions, as none was appointed cabinet member during his entire term (Park, Kyung-ae, 1999: 433.) On the contrary, in the parliament there was a slight increase climaxing in the 1973 election, with the addition of 12 women.

While it does not seem quite significant, such increase in women involvement in institutional politics is in line with the context of a decade (the '70s) where women movements –already seen in the early '60s- began to get more strongly organized, looking for their own liberation, both from the Japanese tradition and the American cultural influence. This period –regarded as “women’s liberation” within the field of Korean women history studies and research, undoubtedly starts a new phase which, regardless of the low almost unchanged percentage of female participation in public offices (see table 1)- (re)positions women in the public space, being the political sphere one of its most relevant expressions –and most questioned by specialists.

In numbers, low female involvement continued in the following years. As shown, participation ranged between 2 and 3.5% of the overall number of parliamentary seats (see table 1.)

Table 1. Women in the National Assembly

Parliamentary Election	Total Elected Members	Total Elected Women	Women/Total Percentage
1 (1948)	200	1	0.5
2 (1950)	210	2	0.9
3 (1954)	203	1	0.5
4 (1958)	233	3	1.3
5 (1960)	233	1	0.4
6 (1963)	175	2	1.1
7 (1967)	175	3	1.7
8 (1971)	204	5	2.5
9 (1973)	219	12	5.5
10 (1978)	231	8	3.5
11 (1981)	276	9	3.3
12 (1985)	276	8	2.9
13 (1988)	299	6	2.0

⁶ On this topic, you can refer to the following documentaries: *The Murmuring* (1995) & *Habitual Sadness* (1997), directed by Byun Young-joo. *Korean Film Council*. Seoul, Korea.

14 (1992)	299	7	2.3
15 (1996)	299	11	3.6
16 (2000)	273	16	5.9
17 (2004)	299	40	13.4
18 (2008)	299	41	13.7

Source: Chin Mikyung (2004.) Reflections on women's empowerment through local representation in South Korea. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 2. Page 297.

Updated data: Women in National Parliaments.

The democratic transition, together with the emergence of new demands from different social sectors (students, intellectuals, workers, women, farmers, and religious leaders) that resumed their involvement in the political arena (Kim, Sunghyuk, 2002) revived expectations in women, who sought to increase and strengthen their space in national politics. Since the early '80s, female activists who individually took part in different civil society organizations promoted the creation of their own female associations, thus managing to increase the relevance of women and gender-related issues in social organizations' agenda. This complex and diverse process for the construction and consolidation of women movements loomed increasingly large. But only in 1987, when the Republic of Korea began its formal transition to democracy with Roh Tae-woo's "Democratic Reform Declaration on June 29th," did women acquire greater prominence in the public space.

The involvement of women in institutional politics evidences a slight increase in female nominations; several women ran for office in the belief that the greater equality associated to the new regime's value system would set the stage for increased female representation. However, the election results failed to live up to their expectations. In the first two parliamentary elections, the number of elected women decreased against the previous elections resulting in a dissociation between the increased involvement in the civil society sphere⁷ and the stagnation in the public sphere. In connection with executive positions, the female activity was even lower, with only 16 women in ministry positions between 1948 and 1998 (Park, Kyung-ae, 1999: 434-435.)

In the presidential election held in December 1997, Kim Dae-jung, progressive leader linked to the struggle for equality and human rights, was elected president. The so-called "people's government"⁸ stressed his capacity as emissary of the civil society and gained unparalleled support from social and workers' movements. Women's organizations managed to capitalize on their struggle thanks to the advent of an administration that listened to their demands, and created an alliance with the president which helped turn some of their basic claims into public policies. Consequently, we witnessed a

⁷ For a more comprehensive discussion of women's civil associations, see: Bavoleo, Bárbara and Iadevito, Paula, *Mujeres, sociedad civil y proceso de democratización en Corea del Sur*. Edition sponsored by Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, in print.

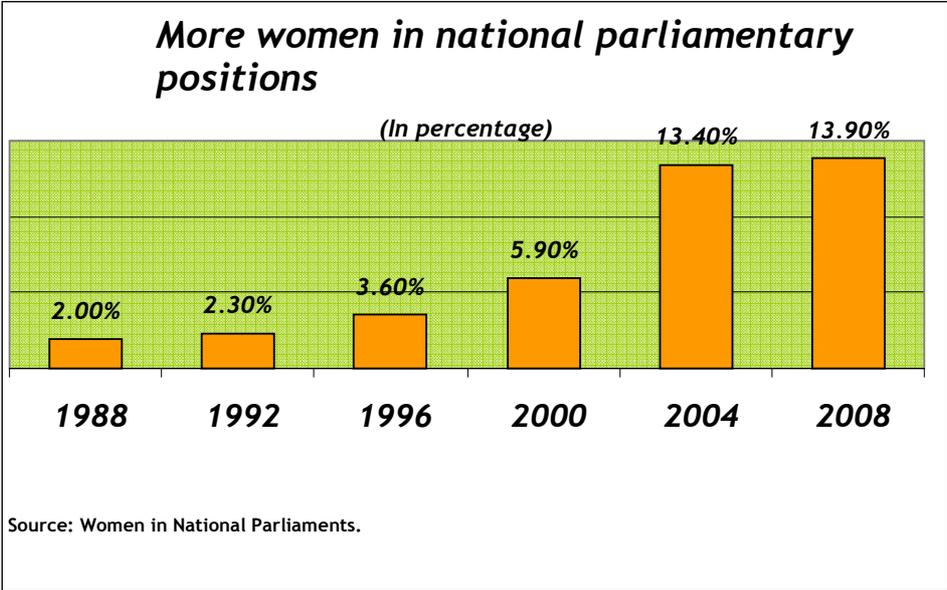
⁸ Slogan used to refer to Kim Dae-jung's administration.

process of gradual increase in the number of women holding top parliamentary positions (the total number of women in the National Assembly increased by 2.3% against the previous election) and executive positions (three women were appointed to ministry positions and, for the first time, a woman was in charge of the superintendence of police.) All this process resulted in the setting up of the Ministry of Gender Equality (Maddison, Sarah & Jung, Kyungja.)

These developments, in terms of the inclusion of women and their situation in the field of institutionalized politics, would lead the development of Korean democracy towards a phase characterized by broader citizen participation, including a significant increase in female involvement in public office during the subsequent administrations.

Women and the State: New Perspectives

Within the framework of the Korean institutional politics, Kim Dae-jung’s successor -Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2007), further strengthened the bonds between the State and women’s movements. The progress towards increased women representation during the previous decades was evidenced in the outcomes of the general election held in 2004; women won 40 out of a total 299 seats in the national parliament, accounting for 13.4%, up from 5.9% held to that date (see chart.)



This quantitative increase in the number of women results not only from a consolidated democratic system promoting values of equality, but also from the enactment of the above mentioned law urging parties to include 30% of female candidates in their slates –a positive discrimination stance.

Within the executive branch, there are changes that place women in more important political areas. Kang Keum-sil, lawyer and women’s civil rights advocate, is the head of the Ministry of Justice and,

in 2006, after holding the top positions in the ministries of Gender Equality (2001) and Environment (2003 and 2004), Han Myung-sook took over as Prime Minister.

Both the recognition of the professional track record of these women and their inclusion in political areas relevant to the South Korean society evidence the advanced process conducive to ensuring equal access to public administration started in the '70s and strengthened during the '90s.

The presidential elections held in December 2007, which resulted in the victory of Lee Myung-bak, a candidate opposed to the then outgoing administration, did not revert the trend that allowed women to gradually acquire prominence in the national political scenario. While in its inaugural address the president expressed his wish to have more women taking part in the decision-making process, and promised to improve the legal system in line with this plan⁹, the first governmental measures did not follow suit. A few months after taking office and after several attempts to both dissolve and curtail the powers of the Ministry of Gender Equality, the budget allocated to this institution significantly decreased and so did its management possibilities.

However, and while it is too soon to draw conclusions, it seems that women's progress in terms of political representation has not declined. In such connection, it should be noted that in the parliamentary elections held in 2008, women won 41 out of a total of 299 seats, thus keeping the percentage achieved in the previous election.

It is clear that the progress of female involvement in Korean institutional politics is not resounding in quantitative terms, but its development shows that women have gradually conquered spaces which would be hard to take away from them. During the '90s, the changes in Korean women's social role became stronger. Not only is the above progress evident in their claim-to-law transformation, such as the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention (1993), the Law for Women's Basic Development (1995), and the Law on Women in Political Positions passed in mid '90s, but also as a theoretical and political restatement of women-related issues. With the adoption of gender as an analytical category geared to understanding social relationships, women's issues have become more complex. Against this background, gender is regarded as an essential element to understand the subjectivity development processes, the social fabric, and the interrelation between both dimensions. Therefore, gender equality becomes the ultimate claim which both includes and frames the struggle for female rights.

Conclusions

The 20th century witnessed the consolidation of a sexist cultural tradition which pushed women to a subordinate place, leaving them at the mercy of men's social, political, and cultural control. Throughout history, the reasons and ways in which women were considered different changed, and so

⁹ **President Lee Myung-bak's Inaugural Address**, February 25, 2008. Available in: http://www.korea.net/news/Issues/issueDetailView.asp?board_no=18994

did the political nature of their struggles. However, the differentiation between men and women has always referred to a hierarchical relationship scheme characterized by the sex/gender inequality, with the peculiarity that it was allegedly shown as natural. We have described how the man/woman, public/private, State/family dichotomies became the core of the explanation regarding women's situation in the political domain, grounding the leadership conquered by men.

With its own cultural overtones, the South Korean case allows for the interpretation of this definition of social spheres and sexual roles which establish and replicate gender and social dominance relationships. And, beyond the historical changes in Korean women's role and their increased involvement in the public space (labor market, educational system, politics, etc.) within a context of modernization, tensions, conflicts, the hegemony of male power, and gender inequalities still continue. In connection with the evident remarkable increase in women's involvement in institutional politics over the past two decades, it should be noted that this process does not challenge political bases, goals, and strategies at their core. In South Korea, politics still is a patriarchal institution, and both hierarchical and power positions remain in the hands of men.

In most of the cases, when women gain access to institutional politics, they do so to the detriment of their own creative and innovative skills. That is to say, the ways that women find to participate and hold public office-governmental positions follow the discipline imposed by the androcentric social and cultural model. Challenging those rules may jeopardize their chances of participation, and even imply the risk of discredit, rejection, and isolation from public office.

However, the process started in the early '70s rooted in the social movement and continued with the advent of democracy has proved that women are capable of overcoming certain obstacles grounded in a culture and a value system which leave them *outside* the political sphere. While in Korea women are still far from gaining fair political representation, the advances over the past years evidence transformations which should not be underestimated. The gap between the ideal gender representation and reality seems to get slightly narrower thanks to policies that encourage involvement and bring on a change in the Korean mindset (Manarin, 2000.)

It is based on the above that the most up-to-date critical feminist factions set up their approaches holding that both feminist thinking and struggle should focus on developing new cultural forms: the forms of women. This undertaking implies a critical review of the theory of the State and modern citizenship; additionally, it should assess other human skills for building more cooperative and democratic social relationships from an epistemic perspective. In other words: today, citizenship as such demands changes to achieve an effective democratization. It is necessary to question the notion of the individual and citizenship advocated by modern age, as well as its effects in women and their universe of senses, from the Social Science stance, particularly promoting a crossover among discipline perspectives (sociology, political science, and gender studies, among others.) From the feminist and epistemological perspectives, the question of non-recognizing women as individuals with full rights, among other aspects of the female issue, is based on the guiding principle of legitimacy and

the social value of what is different. A feminist epistemology which delves into the processes of denying what is different and their subsequent outcomes would help lay the foundations of a new way of political participation and consider the world and social relationships in terms of their diverse possibilities.

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Internet Resources

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<http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org>

<http://www.focusweb.org/publications/2001/neoliberalism-through-the-eyes-of-women.html>

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