

**KOREA'S SEARCH FOR GENDER EQUALITY
AND WOMEN'S CAREER GROWTH**

Tracy L.Tuten and Rachel A. August

ABSTRACT

We examine the role of governments in individual's career development via a sample of Korean women workers. Some government acts have expanded Korean women's career opportunities; these include the ratification of laws such as a quota system for hiring women and maternity leave legislation. On the other hand, the lack of workplace laws such as those promoting equal employment opportunities, equal pay, and denouncing sexual harassment, as well as stringent educational laws and the influx of foreign corporations have restricted women's opportunities in the Korean labor market.

INTRODUCTION

Governments are a significant player in any effort by society to adjust for changes in circumstance and environment. In this role of policy maker and initiator, a government helps shape the society it governs, and its associated organizations, via the various laws, policies, programs, and institutions it creates. Governments can impact more elaborate human activity as well, such a person's ability to practice religion or establish and operate a small business. In this paper, we choose to study the impact of government on one such complex human process -- individual's career development.

Some studies document the importance of more macro-level processes in shaping individual's career paths, such as increased life spans, declining birth rates (Astin, 1984) and shifts in key social organizations such as the Social Security Agency (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). However, the government, while sometimes viewed as one of several key macro-level influences on career development (cf., Super, 1990; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990), has received little focused attention. In this paper we examine this issue in detail, by studying how Korean workers' careers are shaped by their governing body. We aim to investigate that issue by providing both an analysis of the actions of the Korean government and evidence from a sample of women workers in Korea. We have chosen to focus our model on women workers only, due to wide-ranging support for the idea that the paths of women's and men's careers are differently shaped by environmental forces (Gallos, 1989; Melamed, 1996).

KOREAN GOVERNMENT'S ACTIONS AND WOMEN'S CAREERS

The Korean government, like many countries, has recently made efforts to provide career opportunities for women. This issue, referred to as "gender equality" by the Korean government, has been a focus for governments in many

other countries as well. Japan, England, South Africa, and Canada are all struggling with the challenge to develop opportunities for women ("Government to Launch Panel," 2001; "Present Status of Gender Equality," 2000; Gender Roles," 1998; "Government Urged to Take Lead," 2000; "Survey Highlights Inequality," 1999; "Achieving Gender Equality," 1996).

Korea has taken many steps to improve gender equality. Among those are the creation of the Presidential Commission for Women's Affairs, acceptance of the Women's Development Act (1995) and a Five Year Basic Plan for implementation (with the United Nations Development Program), the creation of the Ministry of Gender Equality (2000), a quota system for employing women and a pooling system of preferential hiring for qualified women in government positions (1997), declaring an annual Women's Week (1996), adopting the 21st Century Gender Equality Charter (2001), declaring Equal Employment Week (2001), and passing such laws as the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Law (1996), and the Framework Law on Women's Development (1999).

Of those actions, perhaps the most significant is the development of the Ministry of Gender Equality. President Kim Dae-Jung identifies this action as one of his most important achievements, along with winning the Nobel Peace Prize, during his term in office (Kim, 2001). The Ministry is charged with handling discrimination issues as well as developing policies to improve opportunities for women. The functions of this ministry are broad with regard to gender issues, including planning and coordinating government-wide gender policies, analyses and evaluation of gender issues, elimination of gender discrimination, investigation and correction of gender discrimination in employment, education, and other areas, and advancement of relationships with international organizations.

Despite these efforts, Korean women still feel the gender gap. A survey of women officials in Korea revealed that 64.6 percent of the women had experienced gender discrimination and 58.1 percent said they received fewer opportunities for promotion ("Higher Government Posts," 2000). Referring to the existence of a glass wall, Kim Kyung-hee of the Gender Equality Office noted that women are assigned unimportant responsibilities and provided little training. Consequently, the women are not prepared for future opportunities ("Higher Government Posts, 2000).

Employment figures and salary statistics tell a similar story. According to a report by the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), only 47.4 percent of economically active Korean women were employed in 1999, while 74.4 percent of men were employed. Even among university-educated women, the economic activity participation ratio was only 56 percent for 1998. This was the lowest level of all Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries (Kim, 2001). A recent survey by the Labor Ministry in Korea determined that Korean women's wages are only 64.8 percent of those earned by men. The survey included 5400 companies of five or more employees. The average monthly wage for a female employee was 954,000 won (\$742) compared to 1.47 million won (\$1,147) for men (Lee, 2001).

The above statistics powerfully demonstrate that the position of women in the Korean workforce is not optimal. In the following sections, we more thoroughly document via empirical study how the government has impacted Korean women's work situations.

EXPLORING THE LIVES OF KOREAN WOMEN WORKERS

Twenty-three women, all of whom lived and worked in Korea, composed the sample. All participants were of Korean descent. Other than that, as a group, they varied widely on several demographic characteristics. They ranged in age from 23 to 64, with a mean age of 32. The women held a wide variety of jobs, including a research assistant for a government policy-making department, a computer lab assistant, and an accountant. Eight held professional positions, 7 held clerical positions, 3 held service industry jobs, and the remaining were laboratory assistants. Participants' median annual personal income was 12,000,000 Korean won, equivalent to \$9,630 U.S. dollars. Their median annual household income was 50,000,000 Korean won, equivalent to \$39,000 U.S. dollars. In

regard to family situations, eight participants were currently married and 15 were not married. Thirteen participants lived only with immediate family, 5 lived with extended family, 3 lived with roommates, and 2 lived alone.

A semi-structured, face-to-face interview was conducted with each participant. The interview ordinarily lasted approximately one hour, and was conducted in research office space, a business conference room, or public locations such as restaurants, depending on the women's preference. All interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed. The interview contained 20 open-ended, pre-formulated questions, though when appropriate some topics were probed in more depth with additional questions. The interview was aimed at gathering information about participants' work histories, feelings about their present job and colleagues, and their experiences being a women working in Korea and perceptions of the government's role in their experiences. All interviews were conducted in English since participants were proficient in the language. The women chose pseudonyms for the purposes of the project, mainly Western forenames; those pseudonyms are used here.

Given our aim toward induction, our data processing strategies were drawn from those used in grounded theorizing. We assigned each incidence a label, or "code," referring to a certain kind of response. After this process was completed for each interview, the codes we identified were collapsed into broader categories representing themes. We have edited the quotations, very slightly, for readability and indicated remarks or questions by the interviewer in pointed brackets.

THE KOREAN GOVERNMENT: A CREATOR OF CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Participants' comments indicated that the government's ratification of laws pertaining to women's employment all affected women's career growth. The women felt the most immediate effects from two kinds of laws. One was the quota system aimed at increasing the percentage of women in the workforce. Susan, a computer lab assistant, describes how this system has impacted her work life:

I think the Korean government has made an effort to minimize the discrimination of woman in the work environment as a sort of implemented policy. I think, for example, the government has a sort of policy, like among the official civil servants, woman have constant proportion, like 20 percent; among them 20 percent should be selected from women. Quota policy. (Is it 20 percent?) I'm not sure.

A second kind of law women perceived as having a positive impact on their career opportunities were those aimed at assisting them in balancing work life and home life needs, or what in the United States has been termed "family friendly" laws. In particular, the women felt that laws pertaining to maternity leave had the greatest positive impact on their careers. Sabrina, a travel agent, talks about that issue:

Well, they, I mean, the politics they are changing our laws, rules, government, right? They are giving a lot of chance to woman right now. {What do you hear about?} If a woman is pregnant, and they give people, about 10 years ago or 7 years ago, she has to quit the job because she is pregnant, but nowadays, she will get a holiday, a rest at home, and so it helps the woman to keep working.

The women also had the general sense that the government was striving to assist them, even if the specific efforts were not clear. When asked whether the government played any role in her career, for instance, Angela, a service worker, says:

Not yet, but it will, I guess. Because the government is changing the women policies. They tried to put more attention and more emphasis on the gender equality. So that will be some impact.

THE KOREAN GOVERNMENT AS RESTRICTOR OF CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

The Korean government also plays a second role in the lives of women workers; participants reported many acts by the government, which restricted their career growth. The women consistently held strong convictions that there was a need for the government to ratify many additional employment laws in order to create a situation which would foster their career growth. In recent years, legislation such as the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act and the Sexual Equality Employment Act has sought to improve working conditions and opportunities for women. The Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act seeks to prevent discrimination in employment, education, and in the utilization of consumer goods and services, as well as to enforce the laws regarding discrimination. The Sexual Equality Employment Act improves the status of working women by securing equal treatment between men and women. It is this Act that sets out the maternity guidelines and other family friendly issues. Despite these advances, many participants felt that the current laws were not enough; they perceived a need for more and better laws in these arenas.

Kimmie, a secretary, talks about the problems of sexual harassment women face in Korea. She indicates that, in light of the difficulties Korean women face advancing in the workplace, they sometimes use sexual relationships as a way of obtaining a promotion. This "choice" to enter a sexual relationship seems to be made because of a lack of alternative routes to promotion for women.

In our company we have lots of women, lots of unmarried women and they are very, very competitive in trying to get promoted. {How would they try to get promoted?} Sometimes they get approached -- the top manager. He is Japanese. {Did it work?} Yeah. I think at any company in any society this kind of relationship exists. I think. But when I work there, one of my coworkers, she approached the Japanese supervisor -- sexual approach and finally she was promoted. I was very, very disappointed.

Many other women spoke about the general lack of laws promoting equal employment opportunities for Korean women. While the Sexual Equality Employment Act and the Act on the Punishment of Sexual Crimes and Protection, offer some protections for women, Angela, a service worker, expresses her belief that women are at a disadvantage regarding the initial choice of who to hire for a job in Korea:

So far, I have had direct impact, or negative experience as being a woman. Generally in Korean society, I don't know about in the States, but in this society, woman cannot get a good job. If there are two applicants, and one is woman and one is man, then company prefer man. It is unfair! But that is the reality. The problem is if -- I can understand why that happens -- because companies think if they select women and train them, then, at that time the woman can become a good contributor to the company, they want to quit because they want to marry or they think working is too hard. I mean that taking care of family matters and working is too hard. For that company it is big loss. So that is one reason that companies prefer men... And I feel like -- hard to say -- like discriminated!

Many participants suggested that this problem is rooted in the Korean culture, which, in the words of Joowan, a secretary, construes men as having "higher character" and "more respect" than the women. A few, such as Sarah, another secretary, explained further that it is the Confucian aspect of Korean culture which fosters the belief that women should not be given positions of status or influence.

Well, in Korea, I guess, there aren't many opportunities for women. If you work at a Korean company. I guess first the supervisor or manager there would be a man. They would give more opportunities to men. Supervisors give more opportunities to the men. And the way they look at women employees is like we are not professional but more secretarial. Women do that kind of jobs. And since Korean society is still under the influence of Confucius, they don't really like

women to speak out. Even though they may have a brilliant idea or really good offer, they acknowledge that, but won't like the fact that she spoke out. Still, it's not very good for women.

Several women referred to the lack of laws requiring equal pay for men and women as problematic in women's careers. Jane, an English tutor, talks about a female friend who faces this situation:

A friend of mine studied as a musician. She goes to the company after graduating university but their loan is not the same as men. I heard about that. So after graduating university, men have much more room than women. She complained many times. {Is she paid less?} Yes.

Many participants felt that though maternity leave laws were in place, the laws did not provide extensive enough coverage, also limiting their ability to advance in their careers. A study in 1998 by McKinsey and Company of 40,000 Korean women found that those women perceived the childcare burden as their greatest obstacle to career growth – even greater than discrimination (Choi, Chung, & Kim, 2001). Lucy, a public relations intern, confirms this as a big issue for women, though shows some confusion as to the actual length of allowable leave.

In Korea still, some companies don't consider the woman's responsibilities such as having babies. These days extending the maternity leave is a big issue. Nowadays the period of maternity leave is just one month or one and one-half months, but women want to extend that period to two months. But the government then, politicians, don't accept.

In a conversation about equal rights laws, Diane, a research assistant, further explains how companies do not assist women in ameliorating the conflicts they face juggling work and home life concerns.

When you get married, you will have children and you will need the vacation for the maternal leave and we have to always think about taking care of households and raising children. Because most men, they say, "we are helping, we are helping our wives," but still it is a job, done by housewives, by women. The companies know the mechanics of how things are going in the family, so when there is equally qualified man and woman, the company will choose man, because the woman, she has extra concerns. They think that is going to be impossible to expect 100 percent commitment from that married woman. I think that is stupid, it is absurd. Of course that should be corrected.

Finally, the combined effect of laws regarding employment and public education create a unique situation for Korean women, again illustrating another restriction in the range of opportunities they perceive as available to them. Many chose to seek employment in foreign companies only, rather than broadening their search to include Korean companies; they do this under the assumption that foreign companies provide women with a better quality of work life. When asked what advice she would give women workers in Korea, Jane, an English tutor, says:

In Korean company, if women have babies, they don't like it. Because she will be concerned with the baby or the family problems, so they think woman cannot separate formal and informal or private from work. {What do you think?} I think if I have a job, when I have a job, that atmosphere will be changed but I'm not sure. The reason to have a job in foreign company is that reason.

A secretary, who calls herself Rabbit echoes Jane's sentiments:

Pick a foreign corporation - not the Korean one. Especially the Korean corporation doesn't like female worker. What I heard from other people is that the foreign companies don't care about the employee's gender. What they consider is the capability.

CAN KOREAN WOMEN'S SITUATION BE IMPROVED?

Though many might argue that the United States government has not made great enough strides in its efforts to advance women's opportunities in the workforce, the situation of Korean women seems even more bleak. Wide generalizations about Korean women are somewhat difficult, given the small and non-random sample described here. However, we believe participants' experiences are still instructive in terms of illustrating potential changes the Korean government might consider.

The government has made some clear advances aimed at assisting women via efforts such as the quota policy and some family-friendly laws; still, a substantial set of legislation will likely need to be passed before Korean women can begin to achieve gender equality and expand their role in the workforce. Further, it seems that many of the efforts toward equality made by the Korean government have not actually impacted the lives of women workers, at least those in the sample described here. Though the government has created several highly visible events and institutions, such as Women's Week, the 21st Century Gender Equality Charter, and the Ministry of Gender Equality, none of the participants reported such acts as having any sort of impact on their work lives, much less a positive one.

More than anything, such acts seem to have only scratched the surface of the kinds of efforts the Korean government could be making on behalf of women. The themes mentioned by participants which they perceived as expanding their opportunities -- instituting legal methods such as the quota system, increasing awareness of gender issues, and creating economic expansion that would ultimately result in more jobs for women -- are few in comparison to the number of efforts participants wished the Korean government would make. Participants believed that the government has not been proactive enough in developing and supporting laws in regard to sexual harassment, equal employment opportunity, equal pay, as well as family-friendly laws.

In addition, while the Korean government actively worked to bring in foreign direct investment as a part of its economic expansion policy, those same foreign firms represent an escape for Korean women seeking to acquire a challenging and rewarding career path. As foreign companies entered Korea, they have increased the opportunities for women by fostering gender-neutral hiring policies, though simultaneously restricted women's interest in entering the domestic labor market (Kim, 2001). As women continue to gravitate towards jobs in foreign-owned firms, domestic firms may find a lack of competitiveness due to their own hiring practices.

CONCLUSION

History tells us that the road to gender equality is a long, and often winding one. The United States is one prime illustration of that fact, as are many other western nations. Korean women should not be without hope for the future, though. Korea has made many advances towards enhancing the career development of its women. The Korean government will be well on its way to enhancing the lives of working women and their employing companies by placing value not only on publicity-generating actions such as Women's Week, but also actions likely to have a much greater effect such as ratifying key laws.

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Tracy L. Tuten, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. She received a Fulbright lecturing award in 2001 and was hosted by the Graduate School of International Studies at Korea University in Seoul, Korea. Dr. Ryan's publications have appeared in such journals as *Journal of Business Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, and *Human Resource Management Journal*. She is the recipient of two external awards for teaching excellence (Society for Marketing Advances, Academy of Business Administration). Dr. Tuten can be reached via email at ttryan@vcu.edu.

Rachel August holds a Ph.D. in Psychology from The Claremont Graduate School. She is Associate Professor of Psychology at the California State University – Sacramento. Her research focuses on Quality of Work Life, Career Development and Retirement, Older Workers, Women Workers, Workplace Diversity, and the Nature and Meanings of Work. Dr. August can be reached via email at raugust@csus.edu.