

Korea's view on women and gender essay sample



Korea's view on women and gender inequality has been an issue since the beginning of time. In the past, the country did not see the importance of women. They were discriminated and regarded as inferior to men. However, this has changed over time and a lot of remarkable women had fought to improve the quality of life of women, as well as their rights.

As with all other countries, Korea has had dramatic changes in terms of its economical and political standings after World War II. Although the country's " economic development and social modernization began relatively late, it occurred at an extremely rapid pace" (Choe 291). Once the people saw that the changes were for the improvement of the whole country, they had no problem accepting and embracing these changes.

However, even with the country's remarkable economic development and social modernization, gender inequality was still prevalent as compared with other leading countries. But these issues have been slowly dwindling over recent years. Korean feminists often raise the issue of gender inequality but, when compared with the past, women's positions have greatly improved. Their power, involvement, and influence have increased over the years, giving them more opportunities to partake in the economic and political arena. According to Article 8 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, " all citizens are equal before the law and that there shall not be discrimination in political, economic, social, or culture life on account of sex, religion, or social status" (Palley 1141). This shows that women's rights are now protected by the law. Women receive the same level of education, experience equal opportunities in the workplace, and have equal chances in the area of politics as men do. In this paper, significant social status changes of Korean

women will be examined from the origin of gender inequality to the present day where women have more freedom in terms of their social standing.

Many scholars point out that Confucianism has a lot to do with the inequalities that men and women experience in Korea. The country is considered to hold the strictest forms of Confucianism among other East Asian countries practicing the Confucian tradition (Choe293). Palley even added that “ an understanding of Korean culture and society is not possible without comprehending the nature and role of Confucian thought” (Palley1140). Although Confucianism is an extremely mindful ideology that has been supported by many countries and has recently been re-promoted in China, it is undeniable that it contains ideas that justify women's unequal roles. For example, “ one of the tenets of Confucianism requires three obediences of women: to the father when young; to the husband when married, and to the son in old age” (Palley 1140). This statement clearly explains the inequality between the two genders and also emphasizes women's disadvantageous role in society. “ The influence of Confucian tradition helps maintain the subordinate role of women to men both socially and economically” (Turner 437). However, the expansion of Christian schools during the late nineteenth century helped to remove the traditional Confucian view of women. Thus, a new image of women was created (Turner 438).

In the early 1960s, South Korea started to face new economic development strategies, industrialization, and modernization, which gave women better opportunities to work in higher positions and perform more responsibilities. Industrialization created astonishing amounts of jobs throughout the major

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cities in Korea, which made access to industry easier for both men and women who were looking for jobs. It is thus considered the most epoch-making period for women because traditionally-working women were stigmatized by the society. According to traditional views, women who take good care of their families instead of working and spending time outside the house were considered honorable. Women's participation in the labor force continuously increased. Palley(1143) asserts that " south Korea's economic miracle was achieved in large measure as a result of female labor since women have been very heavily involved in some of the labor-intensive industries." Moreover, Park (741) argues that modernization " provides women with increased access to economic resources, productive skills, and modern labor markets. Women's labor force participation, therefore, increases as industrialization proceeds."

" Between 1960 and 1991, female employment increased 3. 7 times, from two million to 7. 5 million, while the number of male workers increased at a slower rate" (Park 742). The female labor force even increased from 28 percent in 1960 to 40 percent in 1991. The increased involvement of women in the labor force not only empowered women's rights but also brought some positive changes in the labor force structure. As the female labor force elevated the nation's economic status, several issues concerning women's rights in the workplace were also improved. The issues included wages, working hours, and the gender segregation in working place.

Women in Korea used to receive about half the wage of male co-workers. To be more exact, women earn " approximately 44 cents for every dollar that men earn" (Turner 435). According to Park (747), " in the past three

decades, the average female wage fluctuated between 42 percent and 54 percent of the male wage, and between 1972 and 1982, its ratio decreased slightly from 45 percent to 44 percent.” However, nowadays, women are paid about 70 percent of men’s wage. There were some significant changes in the working hours as well. The International Labour Organization’s data indicates that in 1983, “ South Korea was the only nation in which women worked longer hours than men, and this was still the case in 1988” (Park 750). However, the working hour gap between men and women began to diminish in 1987, and by the early 1990s, this gap had disappeared (Park 751). The equal employment opportunity law enacted by the government in December 1987 opened up more opportunities for women. Diminishing the sexual division of labor has been relatively slow compared to other changing trends, but it is still worth noting. In the late 1980s, 87 percent of women worked in one of three industrial sectors; agricultural, manufacturing, or commercial (hotel, restaurant), and these were often considered as women’s occupations (Turner 436). Today, there is an increase in the number of women occupying the professional, managerial, and other top positions, which were traditionally considered only for men. This shows positive changes in the sexual division of labor (Turner 437).

It is not possible to fully understand Korea without knowing the changes that it has gone through in the field of politics. The political arena had been a taboo for women for a long period of time due to traditional views. “

Women’s representation in the national legislative bodies in Korea, less than one percent of the total seats held by women in the 1970’s, has been remarkably lower compared to other democratic countries in the world and

the progress has been slow” (Shin 1). Although there were major leaps in terms of percentage increase, seven percent of the positions in legislative bodies were held by women by 2002, it is still a very low number when compared to other democratic nations. It has been and still is very difficult to enter the National Assembly for Korean women. Even under the brief period of the “ bicameral legislative bodies, which is often seen as a system favorable to women candidates in most countries, women in Korea found it extremely difficult to complete” (Shin 117). During May 1948 to May 1996, 42 women held positions in the National Assembly, of which “ only eight women were able to win their seats by people’s choice through the election” and others entered the Assembly by being appointed to the “ national list of the proportional representation by their respective parties” (Shin 117).

However, the significance of women’s positions within the Assembly is now eye-catching. Since 1998, the number of women cabinet members has started to increase gradually. Though she failed to run for the presidency election, a woman member of the National Assembly, Gun-Hey Park, who possessed the nickname of the Korean Hillary Clinton, was the one of the strongest candidates from the Grand National Party, the most important political parties in Korea. She was not appointed as the representative of her party but she was clearly an wake-up call for conservative politicians. Being a woman created many issues when she became the first ever female candidate for the party. Her existence was considered threatening for Myung Bak Park, the present president, who won the representative title for Grand National Party over Park by a narrow margin. Gun-Hey’s attempt of running for president highly empowered women’s rights in Korea. In the past, the

number of women's participating had been low but their power in the political field was still very influential. Although it was not recognized properly, their impact on society was what made the present nation of Korea as successful as it is today.

According to Shin (32), the "beginning of women's political consciousness in modern Korea may date back to the late nineteenth century when Korea was faced with the imminent danger of losing national sovereignty to competing foreign powers after Korea was forced to make a treaty with Japan in 1876, known as the Kanghwa Treaty." In other words, the South Korean women's political participation first started due to the resistance movement, which involved strong patriotism (Park, political representation 433). Since then, the Korean women's political activity became very vigorous especially with movement that required patriotism. The most famous women's political involvement was the March First Movement, also known as the Korean independence movement of 1919 (Shin 38).

A total of more than two million people, both men and women, participated in this movement and "approximately 10,000 women nationwide participated in the movement" (Shin 38). Although the participation of women seemed fewer than that of the men's, it was still an enormous number for the women. The majority of well-educated women in the movement were either teachers or students (Shin 38). Kwan-Sun Yu is considered to be the most famous martyr from this movement. She was only a sixteen-year old student at that time and she, along with other Koreans involved in the movement, died after being tortured by the Japanese army. While many people surrendered when they were captured by the Japanese, <https://assignbuster.com/koreas-view-on-women-and-gender-essay-sample/>

she did not yield and stood for what she believed in. She chose death rather than to surrender and give up. Kwan-Sun Yu was considered as one of the most impressive Koreans in the history of the country. Because of this, her contribution and involvement is taught to elementary students in Korea for them to remember her and what she fought for.

At this time, women's involvement is even more prominent than in the past and is recognized by society. According to Palley (1141), " there are presently two types of women's organizations that seek improved conditions for women in Korea." Those two groups are identified as radical groups and reformist groups. Palley emphasized the meanings of these terms because the terms used above are different from the Western concept. Although both groups pursue benefits for women, there are great differences in terms of what they are asking for. Radical groups are relatively recent groups with a small membership along with younger leaders. These groups are identified with broader human rights issues, " such as the torturing of prisoners, democratization of the political system, and with the reunification with North Korea" (Palley 1142). Radical groups tend to affiliate themselves with the Korean Women's Association United (KWAU). On the other hand, reformist groups, " which women activists refer to as " traditional" or " mainstream" organizations, pursue women's role within the constraints of the existing society. (Palley 1142) These groups support the ruling party and are known as pro-government organizations (Palley 1143). These organizations are affiliated with the Council of Korean Women's Organization (CKWO) (Palley 1144).

All of these would not be possible if women did not receive proper education. This makes education in Korea the most important area. Previously, women had few rights to receive education due to the incorrect traditional views. In the ancient period where *seodang* existed, which is a Confucian principle school that existed during the *Chosun* (1392-1910) period, women were not even allowed to enter the doorway near *seodang*. As Korea faced social reform, the need to educate women was then realized. According to Shin (32), the years 1876 to 1910 was called the “ Enlightenment Period.” During this time, the need for women’s education was first discussed by Korean intellectuals and political leaders. Within that period, several schools that only catered to women were established by various groups. Two of the most famous schools, Sookmyung Women’s School and Ewha Women’s School, still exist today, and were founded to provide a formal education for girls of the royal family (Shin 32). With Korea’s modernization, there had been an “ improvement in education and professional training for women” (Palley 1143). Today, attending primary and secondary schools is required for every citizen of Korea. There is also no restriction for getting an education in terms of gender. Women have equal opportunities to acquire education as men do.

Due to globalization and western influences, the rights of Korean women have constantly improved through the years. Although women’s movements are relatively new in Korea, there are groups and organizations concerned with issues of gender equality and believed in equal opportunity (Palley 1153). However, these are not widely recognized.

Looking back, it is incredible how things have changed over the years. Women have the potential to accomplish a lot of things if given the chance.

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It would not be fair to let the men experience all the development in the world and let the women stay at home. The fight for women's rights could not have been possible without industrialization, movements, and improved education. As one of the economically influential countries, Korea is now a place where gender differences do not exist. There are still a lot of men who hold strong traditional views and values but women's rise of power and fame throughout the nation is becoming more prominent. They are now becoming leaders and learning how to take control. They have become the voices of other women who feel oppressed and abused. Indeed, gender inequality in Korea has become a thing of the past and considered history to many people.