

Changing status of South Korean women from 1990s to now

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Introduction

In 1997, the most serious financial crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis, happened in South Korea. People suffered from the economic regression, especially for women who were laid off prior to men. Despite the gap between South Korean women and men has narrowed when compared to the 1990s, gender inequality still exists in society. Different major events related to gender problems happened in South Korea. Gender issues are gaining more spotlight nowadays, for example, the #MeToo movement, the Nth room case are some of the controversial topics in the discussion of gender equality.

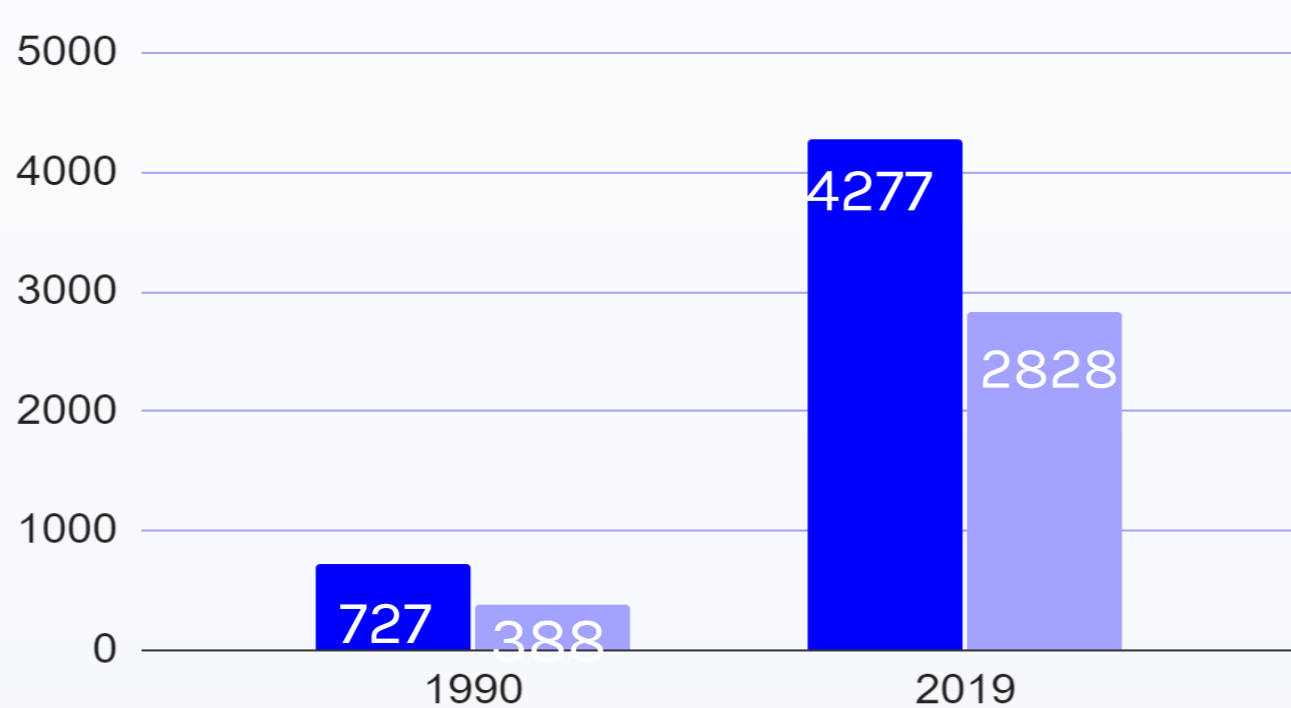
Gender Equality in South Korea

Being a developing country, Korea does well in promoting its own culture with great soft power, K-pop. However, it is not as good as other aspects when it comes to gender problems. For gender problems, the government enacted new laws and enforcement after the women's movement, like the Law against Prostitution in 2004 and the abolition of the Family-Head System in 2005. However, Korea is still lagging behind in terms of gender equality with a low ranking in global statistics. According to the World Economic Forum, Korea ranked 10 out of 158 in 2021 on the Gender Gap Index (GGI) ranking, which is even lower than some underdeveloped countries, like Peru (62/158), Kenya (95/158), etc⁸.

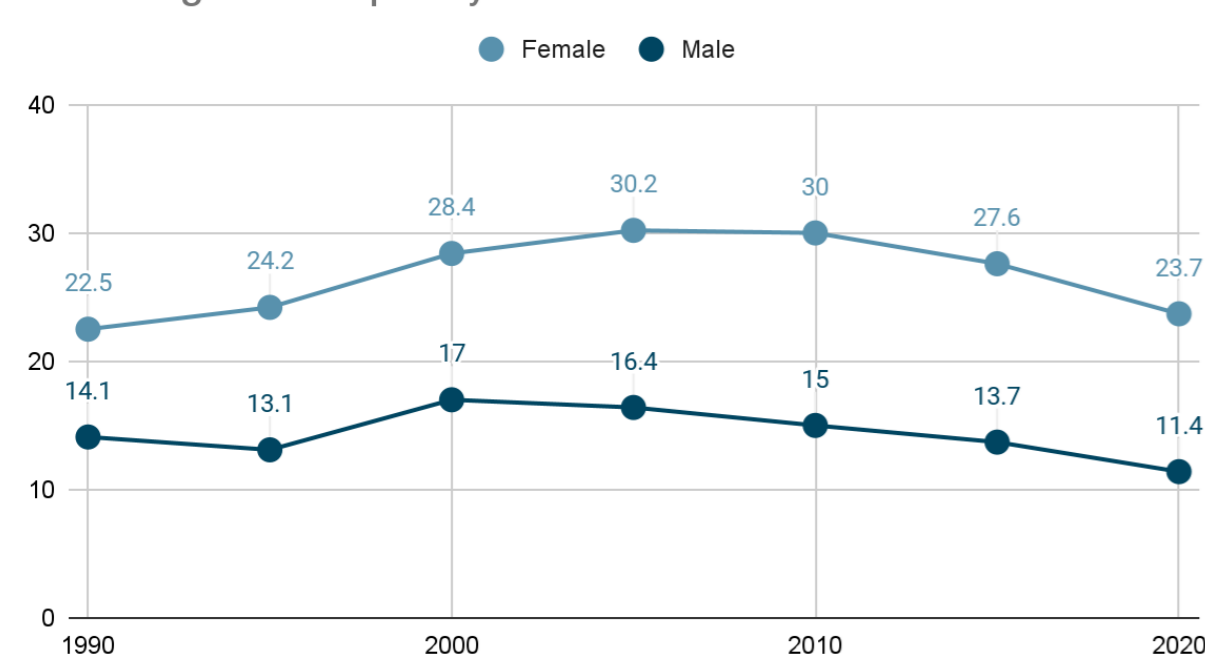
Individual Aspect

Education is not solely for men nowadays². More women can receive proper education and they even have better results when compared to men. For average monthly wages, women's and men's wages rose 7 times and 6 times respectively in 2019. Although women have a larger increase in their wages, the differences between wages of women and men also increased from 53.4% in 1990 to 66.1% in 2019⁶.

Monthly Average Wages (Thousand Won)^{5,6}



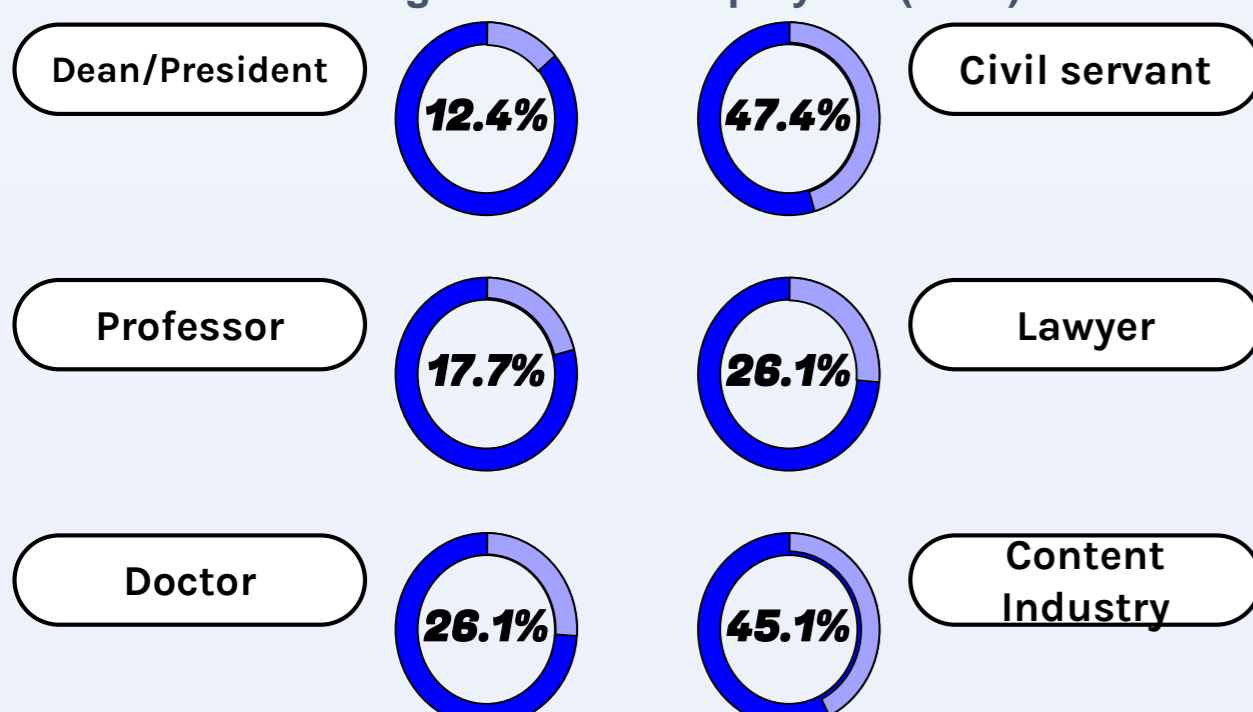
Percentage of Temporary Workers in 1990-2020^{5,6}



Workplace Aspect

The percentage of temporary workers for females has been higher than men since 1990. In 2020, the percentage for women is 23.7% which is double that of men⁶. Moreover, the percentage of female employees also remained low in different industries. The percentage of female employees increased when compared to 1995 but still the minority, especially for some professional jobs. Men are taking more leading and main positions than women. These numbers are evidence of the gap between women and men in the workplace. As a result, women in general are having a lower status and receiving less wages than men.

Percentage of female employees (2020)⁵



Political Aspect

More women pass civil service examinations and work in the political sector than in the past. In 1991, there were only 8 females in 858 elected Broad Unit Local Assembly, which was only 0.9% elected⁵. In 2018, the number rose to 160 out of 824, accounting for 19.4%⁶. Moreover, women's participation in government committees increased from 9.0% in 1990 to 40.5% in 2019^{5,6}. All these figures show a dramatic increase in women participating in the political sector. However, the number is still small as men are still the majority in the government. Especially for representative and head positions, men dominated and prevented women from participating in decision-making positions⁴. Worse, half of the Korean population prefers a male politician which reduces the chances for women to join the political sector².

Reasons for Gender Inequality

There are three reasons for gender inequality in South Korea, which are traditional mindsets, prejudice and men's perception towards women.

Traditional Mindset

South Koreans had a belief that men should be the breadwinner and women should take care of the family. Although gender bias may fade out, it still exists in people's minds as society is having conservative views toward gender and family values². People expect women to spend more time with the family than men after marriage⁷. Despite a dual-income family, women take most responsibilities for childcare and households. It is hard for them to fulfill both roles of wives and mothers resulting in work-life imbalance.

Childcare became the biggest challenge to dual-income families². They face difficulties in childcare as no one can take care of children when parents have to work. Although there are childcare facilities in society, it may not be enough for all families and some cannot afford extra expenses on it. For the sake of the children, one of the parents has to sacrifice their time or work. As a result, some women have to give up their job voluntarily or involuntarily so as to take care of their families.

Work allocation for men and women is different. People believe women are better in soft issues which are healthcare, feminism, and education while men are better in hard issues which are economy, security, diplomacy, etc¹. This is a stereotype that limits women's ability. Thus, it is not easy for women to gain a position or rise upwards in certain fields, resulting in a lower number of female employees.

Prejudice towards women

People believe men are better than women with their military service experience³. They are more willing to follow instructions, take up responsibilities, and be more patient towards difficulty as what they are trained in the military while women do not. However, no one can guarantee military experience makes men better than women. Thus, this is prejudice toward women that men will be more competitive than women.

Moreover, women need to take maternity leave when they bear a child which men leave shorter or even do not need. From the perspective of employers, they have prejudices against women as they believe men will contribute more to the company³. People discriminate against women without considering their ability and performance. Not only does this affect women's earnings, but it also affects employers' preferences when they recruit new employees. This results in a lower employment rate and average wages for women.

Men's perception of women

Confucianism requires women to obey men in their families⁴. Although this mindset weakened in the past years, it is hard to fully eradicate it from everyone's minds. Some South Korean men still believe they are superior to women so they have the authority to control women with their male-centered and female-subordinated structure³. They look down on women and become sensitive toward feminism leading to a negative attitude when facing women. Together with men's dominance in different aspects, it is easier for women to experience unfair treatment, like discrimination or domestic violence in society or in the family¹.

Conclusion

Some conservative thinking is no longer applicable when time flies. Women nowadays in South Korea are having the same rights as men. They can choose their own lives and are no longer limited by their family. Although women become more valued in society, men are dominating. This results in unfair treatment of women in different aspects. The aforementioned situations are not happening in South Korea only, but also in different countries. However, if we look at the economic development of South Korea, gender inequality looks worse when compared with other countries that have poorer economic performances than South Korea. It still needs time for South Korean women to reach real equality.

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