

# Political consciousness and empowerment of young women in South Korea

Jiso Yoon, Sooyeon Lee, Meekyung Moon,  
Insoon Kim, Jaeyoung Cheon, Soo Hyun Kwon



**Political consciousness and empowerment  
of young women in South Korea**

---

©2020

**Korean Women's Development Institute**

225 Jinheung-ro Eunpyeong-gu

Seoul, 03367, Republic of Korea

[www.kwdi.re.kr](http://www.kwdi.re.kr)

# Contents

<b>I . Research backgrounds</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II . Research methods</b>	<b>2</b>
1. Data collection	2
2. Expected results and limitations	3
<b>III . Youth politics in South Korea</b>	<b>4</b>
1. Elections and youth politics	4
2. Young people in political parties	4
<b>IV . Perceptions of young party members</b>	<b>5</b>
1. A survey	5
2. In-depth focus group interviews	10
<b>V . Policy suggestions</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>17</b>

# Tables

〈Table 1〉 Research methods .....	3
〈Table 2〉 Article 47 of the Public Officials Election Act .....	12

## Figures

[Figure 1] Experience and intension of running for office ..... 8

[Figure 2] Policies that young members intend to pursue if elected .. 9



# Political consciousness and empowerment of young women in South Korea

Jiso Yoon  
Sooyeon Lee  
Meekyung Moon  
Insoon Kim  
Jaeyoung Cheon  
Soo Hyun Kwon

## I . Research backgrounds

Over the past ten years, active political participation among young women has drawn public attention in the country. The participation of women in their 20s and 30s has been noticeable not only in public protests but also in voting. In the 19<sup>th</sup> presidential election, women in that age group showed about 5% greater participation rate compared to their male counterparts. What is particularly noticeable is young female voters' high political efficacy and support for the incumbent Moon Jae-in government. While 35.1% of those who voted were aged 40 years or under, young members, male and female combined, amount to mere 1% of the total members in the 20<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

The lack of political representation of young women makes it difficult to secure a pool of potential female politicians, creating a structural obstacle that restricts women's political representation across society.

Without an increasing number of young women willing to stand for elected offices, the problem of women's political underrepresentation will not be easily resolved. Although the situation has improved since the introduction of a legislative gender quota in 2000, some political parties remain reluctant to nominating female candidates and focus the application of the quota to proportional representation seats but not sufficiently to local constituency seats. In order to improve the political representation of young women, therefore, it seems necessary to pursue measures focused on young women rather than simply relying on the existing gender quota.

Despite great interest in politics and active political participation among young South Koreans, especially young women, they are not widely recognized as political actors and have failed to obtain sufficient political representation. In order to answer why their political activities fail to lead to political representation, this research looks into political parties, which in a modern democracy play a unique and critical role that can not be fulfilled by the government or social movements, including the recruitment of new party members, provision of political training, and cultivation of potential candidates.

## II . Research methods

### 1. Data collection

This research uses a survey of perceptions among young party members and in-depth focus group interviews with young members and the heads of youth groups in political parties. Specifically, an online survey was conducted with 975 members in the 19-39 age bracket of



eight political parties: Democratic Party, Liberty Korea Party, Bareunmirae Party, Justice Party, People's Party, Our Republican Party, Green Party, and Our Future Party. In-depth focus group interviews were conducted with 16 young members from four parties, eight heads of the youth groups of eight parties, and five former and incumbent young female politicians.

〈Table 1〉 Research methods

Methods	Details
Online survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants: 975 male and female members in the 19–39 age bracket of eight political parties: Democratic Party, Liberty Korea Party, Bareunmirae Party, Justice Party, People's Party, Our Republican Party, Green Party, and Our Future Party</li> <li>• Survey period: July 15–August 10, 2019</li> <li>• Method: Online survey</li> </ul>
In-depth focus group interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants: 16 young male/female party members, eight heads of youth groups of political parties, and five young female politicians</li> <li>• Period: April–September, 2019</li> </ul>

## 2. Expected results and limitations

Due to the issue of privacy protection, it was not possible to obtain a complete list of young members from each party and create a sample. In order to overcome this limitation, we actively sought cooperation from each party so that the survey questionnaire would be delivered to a representative sample of their young members across the country.

This research is significant in that it used a survey of party members, which is rare in South Korea, and produced basic data on youth politics targeting young party members of a specific age group. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to discussions on minority representation by gender and age.

### III. Youth politics in South Korea

#### 1. Elections and youth politics

In order to determine how well young individuals (those in their 20s and 30s) and women are represented, we looked into the recent parliamentary elections, gubernatorial elections, and local elections (*gicho* and *gwangyeok* councils). Overall, the proportion of young candidates and elected officials was very low. The low proportion of young candidates indicates that young people already face a barrier in their party's nomination process, not that they fail in elections. According to the statistics on candidates and the elected for the National Assembly (NA) and *Gwanyeok* and *Gicho* councils, both young individuals and women are higher in number in terms of both candidates and the elected in proportional seats than in local constituency seats. This suggests that women and young people compete with each other over proportional representation seats, which are fewer in number compared to local constituency seats.

#### 2. Young people in political parties

In order to obtain a preliminary understanding of perceptions among young party members about their status in their parties, we conducted an online survey and interviewed the heads of youth groups in eight political parties.

The age threshold for "young members" was 35 years for the Justice Party and Green Party and 39 years for the Bareunmirae Party and People's Party. In the People's Party, the age limit was placed as one of eligibility criteria for candidates running for elected offices but any

member could join its youth group regardless of age. Those aged 45 or under were defined as “young members” in both the Democratic Party and Liberty Korea Party. Our Republican Party did not have an official age limit, although they believed young members to be 45 years of age or younger. Our Future Party, which claims to be a youth party, did not have an official age limit for “young members”.

We examined each party in order to determine the number of young members and the proportions of male and female members in their youth groups. First, the Democratic Party had the largest number of members aged 45 or under with about 46% (310,000) of its 720,000 registered members as of October 2018. In the case of the Bareunmirae Party, young members amounted to 16% (58,757) of its 363,701 members as of July 2019, with 35,099 male members and 23,653 female members. The Justice Party, which defines young members to be those aged 35 or below, had 4,645 men and 2,356 women among its young members. As for the People’s Party, there were 1,100 male members and 1,050 female members in its youth group, which consists of those aged 39 or below. Last, the Green Party’s young members consisted of 1,185 men and 2,066 women.

## IV. Perceptions of young party members

### 1. A survey

A survey was conducted of 975 young members of eight political parties about their interests in politics and society, policy preferences, party membership and activities, opinions about party democracy, and intention for candidacy.

Compared to the general public in the similar age group, young party members were more actively involved in labor unions, religious organizations, clubs, civic organizations, community groups, charity organizations, and social economy groups. They were also more active in other political activities such as joining protests, filing complaints, posting on social networking sites.

In terms of political participation, ideological orientation, and political efficacy, a statistically significant difference was found between young male and female members. Young female members tended to be more participatory in political activism such as online petitions or boycotting compared to their male counterparts. Ideologically, moreover, young female members were more progressive and showed greater political efficacy.

Among young registered party members, an average of 79.2% joined the party voluntarily and 20.8% did so following recommendations from others. The most common cause for joining their party was to show support for and agreement with the party's ideology. As to their level of participation in party activities, young members perceived their degree of engagement to be high, marking an average of 2.78 points on a 4-point scale. When asked what obstructs further participation, the most common answer was lack of time. For male members, other causes included insufficient notifications about party events, the party using young members just for the purpose of mobilization, lack of consensus, and the party's hierarchical order and culture. Meanwhile, female members had a greater tendency, than did their male counterparts, of seeing gender-discriminatory practices and culture as a problem.

In regard to what is needed from the party to expand young members' participation, we provided eight options as the following: changes in the

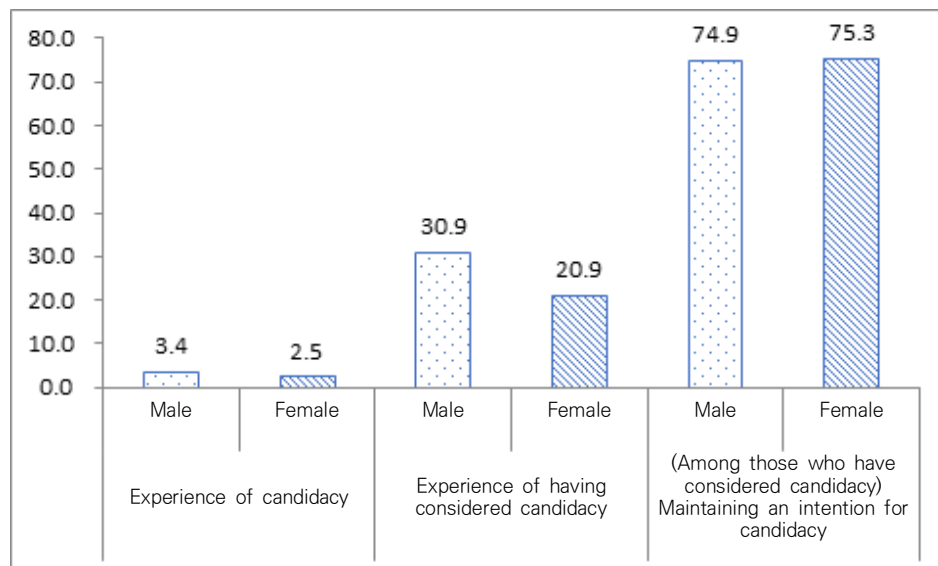
perception and attitudes of party leaders; youth training programs; support for youth groups; expansion of young members' involvement in decision-making; efforts to ensure equal participation of male and female members; cultivation of young leaders; implementing democratic practices; and promoting gender equality in organizational practices and culture. All of these eight options received similarly high support from both male and female members, indicating a consensus among young members that their parties have yet to make greater efforts to be inclusive of young members in the party's operation and activities. When it comes to gender differences, "Changes in the perceptions and attitudes of party leaders" received a greater response from male members and "Efforts to ensure equal participation of male and female members" and "Promoting gender equality in organizational practices and culture" from female members.

When it comes to the perceived level of democracy and gender equality in the operation of their party, there was no gender difference in responses in regard to the former. However, a larger number of female members, compared to their male peers, believed that their party's practices were discriminatory against women.

In terms of institutional and policy measures to facilitate democracy and gender equality within political parties, the process of transparent and fair nomination received equally great support from both male and female members. Compared to male members, meanwhile, female members placed a greater emphasis on ensuring equal participation of men and women in decision-making, guaranteeing minority representation, and developing party platform and policies based on gender equality.

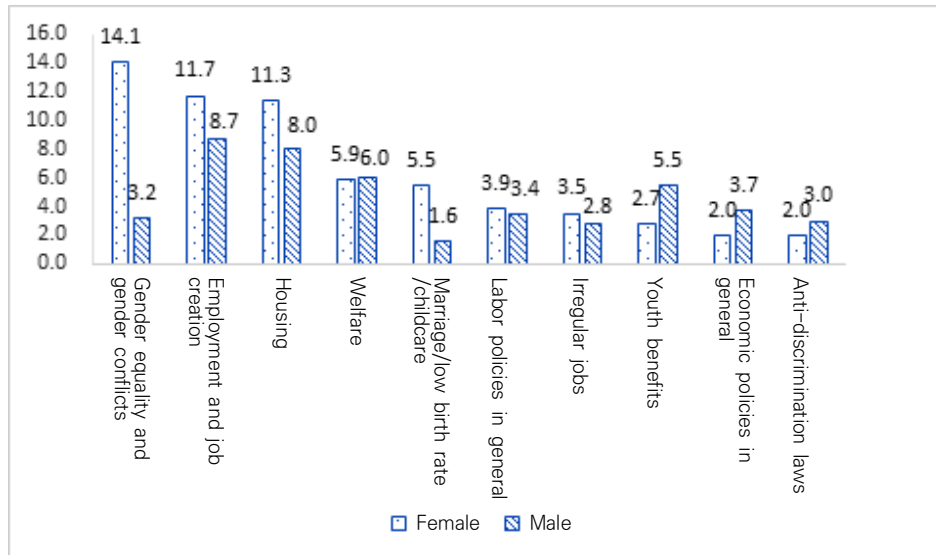
Regarding the experience of candidacy, criteria for candidate nomination, and youth representation, only a very small number of young

members had the actual experience of running for election while 27% have considered candidacy at least once. Among those who have considered candidacy, over 70% maintained a willingness to run for elected offices. While the number of those who have ‘considered’ candidacy was greater among men than among women, there was no gender difference in terms of both the actual experience of candidacy, and the future intension for candidacy.



[Figure 1] Experience and intension of running for office

When asked to describe the policies they want to pursue if they are elected, female members chose gender equality with 14.3%. Among all policy items, gender equality and the issue of gender conflicts had the greatest gap in response between male and female members, with the latter showing greater interest in them than did the former. From this result, it is inferred that young female members, if elected, are likely to place gender issues among major policy agenda and seek a greater representation of young women’s voices.



Note: The numbers indicate the proportions of responses by young members regarding the top ten policy issues that they desire to pursue if elected

[Figure 2] Policies that young members intend to pursue if elected

As for the need for support from the party for young members to stand for candidacy, gender differences were not found except regarding protection from physical threats from voters, for which the average point was significantly greater among female members than among male members. Regarding measures to promote youth representation, female members expressed a greater need for equal opportunities for men and women in the nomination process.

Last, there was a stark gender difference in relation to gender equality and other gender issues. Female members showed greater support than their male peers regarding gender issues such as same-sex marriage, punishment of sex offenders, anti-stalking legislation, and gender-equal cabinet appointments. Furthermore, the number of those who believe that incumbent National Assembly members have yet to make sufficient efforts to promote gender equality policies was greater among women than among men.

## 2. In-depth focus group interviews

Focused group interviews were performed with young members of political parties. All in all, the results of these interviews reaffirmed the findings of the survey.

A number of interviewees agreed that the current organizational structure fails to adequately reflect the voices of young members. Some complained that while the party promotes itself as one valuing the voices of young people, young members are allowed only in peripheral positions and their voices are not sufficiently heard. Interviewees also pointed to the lack of proper systems within parties and the National Assembly to promote the participation and growth of young people. According to these interviewees, even if there is an official youth unit in the party, it is often not involved in the party's decision-making process. It has also been pointed out that the party's definition of "young generations" is too broad and ambiguous to effectively represent young people.

In particular, there was a complaint that young women are simply used for their image by established political circles. Interviewees said that most parties lack mechanisms to guarantee the participation of young women and the operational environment of the National Assembly and parties is unfavorable and restrictive to women. When asked about reasons behind the parties' reluctance to creating favorable systems for young women, most interviewees pointed to the power dominance of older and male members. This means that young women are doubly placed in peripheral positions in the established power structure.

Young female members' concern about the gender-discriminatory culture within their parties, which was identified in the survey, were also apparent in the interviews. Female interviewees said that their parties



operate around senior and male members and use young women just for show. Overall, there seems to be a clear gender difference in the experience of party-based political participation among young members. In this regard, it is necessary for parties to implement measures to make themselves a more favorable place for young women's political participation.

## V. Policy suggestions

- Introducing a youth quota with clearly specified gender ratios
  - The cultivation of young political candidates should be facilitated in order to increase youth representation. Some parties already have rules in place to nominate a certain percentage of young candidates while others give extra points to young candidates based on their own rules. In order to secure a sustainable number of young candidates, however, it is recommended that parties introduce a youth quota for their candidate lists, in addition to the gender quota defined in Article 47 of the Public Official Election Act.
  - In reference to the examples of other countries, age and gender elements will need to be determined regarding the youth quota.
  - Introducing a youth quota is expected to help prevent discrimination against age and gender in elections and ensure youth representation. Since a quantitative expansion of young female candidates may not necessarily guarantee the representation of young women's agenda, however, parties will need to have in place a system through which the voices of young women are reflected in the decision-making process and competent young female candidates are cultivated.

〈Table 2〉 Article 47 of the Public Officials Election Act

Existing article	<p>Article 47</p> <p>① A political party may nominate its members as candidates (hereinafter 'party-nominated candidates') within the limit of the total number to be elected for the corresponding constituency. As for proportional seats for <i>gu</i>, <i>si</i>, and <i>gun</i> councils, parties can nominate candidates surpassing the total number to be elected.</p> <p>② A political party, when nominating candidates in accordance with Paragraph 1 of this Article, shall follow a democratic procedure.</p> <p>③ When nominating candidates for proportional seats for the National Assembly and local councils, a political party shall nominate female candidates for 50/100 of its candidate list and assign a female candidate to every odd number in the list.</p> <p>④ When nominating candidates for a special election for local constituency seats for the National Assembly and local councils, a political party shall strive to nominate female candidates for 30/100 or higher of the total local constituency seats.</p> <p>⑤ When nominating candidates for a special election for local constituency seats for local councils, a political party shall nominate at least one female candidate to every NA local constituency (excluding <i>gun</i> districts and a specific district of the autonomous region if that district comprises a NA local constituency together with other autonomous region or <i>gun</i>) either in the election for local constituency <i>si</i> or <i>do</i> council members or in the election for local constituency autonomous <i>gu</i>, <i>si</i>, and <i>gun</i> council members.</p>
Proposed revision	<p>New addition: Article 47</p> <p>⑥ A political party is recommended to assign young candidates for 30/100 of the party's proportional candidate list (every third candidate)</p> <p>⑦ A political party is recommended to assign young candidates for 10/100 of its candidate list for elected local offices.</p>

Source: Public Officials Election Act from the National Law Information Center (<http://www.law.go.kr/%EB%B2%95%EB%A0%B9/%EA%B3%B5%EC%A7%81%EC%84%A0%EA%B1%B0%EB%B2%95>, accessed on October 26, 2019)

Note: The proposed revision was created in reference to the youth quota system proposed by the PSPD Youth Council (August 22, 2017). "A Young National Assembly by Young People and Young Voices to the National Assembly", a press conference for the launch of Young Actions for Political Reform (<https://www.peoplepower21.org/Youth/1524546>, accessed on October 26, 2019)

○ Securing party budgets to support young women

- Article 28-2 of the Political Funds Act stipulates that political parties shall assign 10% of their government subsidy to promote women's political advancement. In some parties, however, the details of the fund's expenditure were obscure or the money was used to pay for female party employees' wages. Parties that receive subsidies for current expenses should assign part of the fund to produce competent female politicians.
- In 2019, the People's Party selected its Women's Political Development Funds programs through public contests. The topics chosen as a result included the identification and cultivation of female politicians for the expansion of political participation by women and mothers and training for potential and incumbent female political leaders, among others. Following suit, other parties should use the funds to support small group activities, training, candidacy support programs for young women.

○ Creating an ethics code to establish gender equality in party practices

- In our research, young female members found their party's organizational structure and culture to be discriminatory against women. Each party should strive to establish a culture of gender equality. Creating an ethics code for gender equality can be the first step for parties to publicly show their commitments for gender equality.
- The Green Party has a pledge for equality, which party members recite before they start any party event. The pledge includes "We don't engage in discriminatory remarks or conducts based on

stereotypes against age, gender, sexual identity, and sexual orientation” and “The organizer of this event shall warn against and prevent any hate remarks against social minorities.” The People’s Party has also adopted a mandate for gender equality, which includes “We, the People’s Party, denounce all forms of discrimination and/or exclusion based on gender, sexual identity, and sexual orientation; strive to eradicate violence and exploitation based on gender; and work to create a society that values human rights, justice, and democracy.” Other parties are needed to follow suit.

○ Encouraging young women’s groups within parties

- According to this research, young female members seemed to share similar concerns and policy interests with each other. Young women’s units or groups may facilitate their participation in political discussions and networking with each other.
- For example, the Justice Party has several women’s groups, including Yellow Feminists (a policy study group for female members), and Just Feminists for women’s human rights. Other parties need to encourage young women’s groups to be created on a voluntary basis in accordance with their needs and demands.

○ Securing the representation of young women in party positions and committees

- Parties with young women relatively actively participating in the decision-making process make conscious efforts to defy a gender-based hierarchy and to promote an equality-oriented communication structure.

- Some parties have in place a quota for youth and women in their party's official positions and committees. In the Green Party, women should take up minimum 50% of the party's representative bodies and committees. The Justice Party's leadership consists of one leader and three vice-leaders. As to the three vice-leader positions, the party assigns one for young members and another for female members.
- Party rules on the decision-making process should mandate the participation of young and female members as a way to provide them opportunities to practice and exercise their leadership. Young women working in major party positions are important in that they serve as role models for future generations.

○ Candidacy support projects for young women

- A youth quota will be nominal without the party's efforts to cultivate and support young female candidates. Parties should make conscious efforts to nominate young women as candidates and to provide them with practical knowledge and resources for campaign-running and financial support for livelihood.
- The Green Party's 2020 Women's Candidacy Project is designed to develop female candidates over the course of a year in the run up to the 21<sup>st</sup> parliamentary election. The project includes practical knowledge and skills, such as techniques of how to link personal stories to policies and deliver effective messages to constituents (image-making, speeches, debates, etc.), camp organization, and teamwork building. As of March 2020, four potential candidates for proportional seats completed the project and were preparing for the upcoming election, receiving livelihood support from the

party.

- This project should serve as a good model for other parties to follow suit. The presence of young female candidates running for elected offices is critical as it communicates a message to other young women that politics is for everybody.

---

## References

Public Officials Election Act from the National Law Information Center  
(<http://www.law.go.kr/%EB%B2%95%EB%A0%B9/%EA%B3%B5%EC%A7%81%EC%84%A0%EA%B1%B0%EB%B2%95>, accessed on  
October 26, 2019)

“A Young National Assembly by Young People and Young Voices to  
the National Assembly”, PSPD Youth Council, a press conference for  
the launch of Young Actions for Political Reform  
(<https://www.peoplepower21.org/Youth/1524546>)







Korean Women's Development Institute

225 Jinheung-ro, Eunpyeong-gu  
(1-363, Bulgwang-dong) Seoul, 03367, Republic of Korea  
TEL 02.3156.7000 FAX 02.3156.7007  
<http://www.kwdi.re.kr>