

An illustration featuring a central white circle with the text "What is Affirmative Action?" in blue. This central circle is surrounded by a ring of stylized human figures in various colors and poses, all set against a background of concentric blue circles. The figures are diverse in appearance, including different hair colors, styles, and skin tones, and some are shown with their arms raised or hands clasped, suggesting a group discussion or a community gathering.

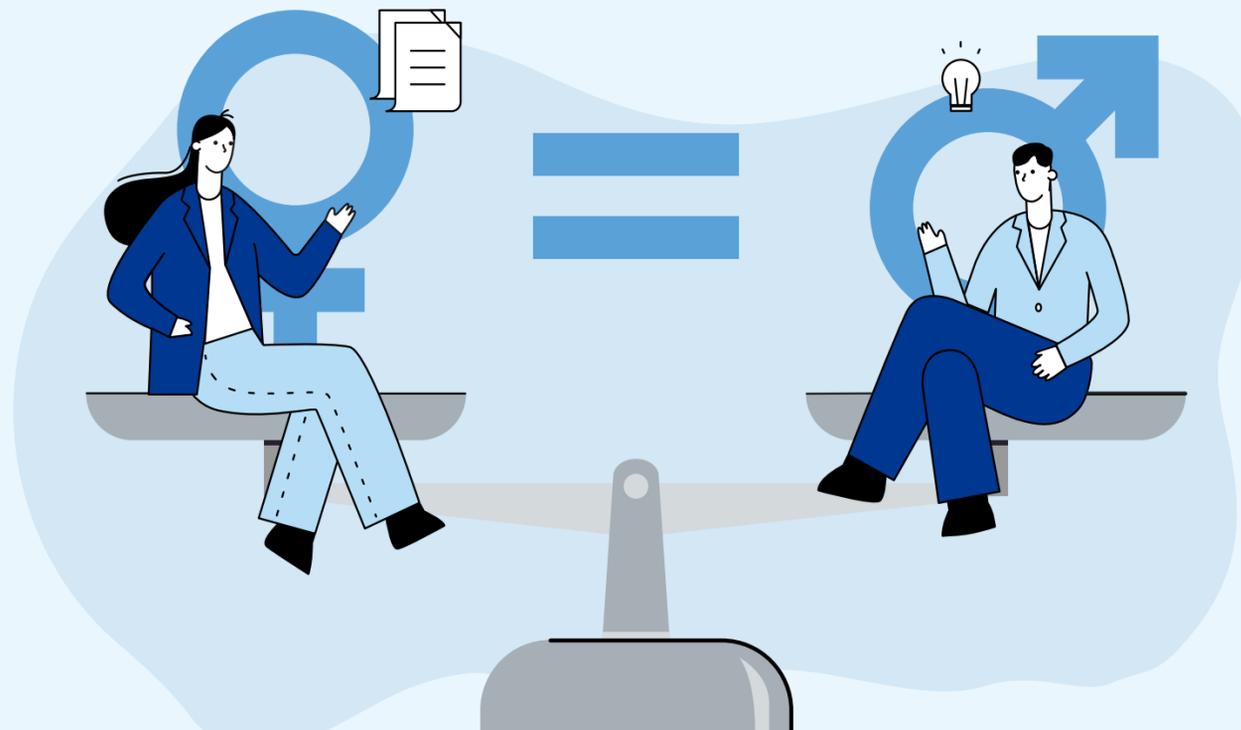
**What is
Affirmative
Action?**

Definition of Affirmative Action



Affirmative actions refer to a set of active intervention measures to increase the proportion of an under-represented group of people, who suffer structural discrimination in key areas of the society, to above a certain level. Affirmative actions are aimed at improving discrimination and realizing equality.

Characteristics of Affirmative Actions to Improve Systemic Gender Discrimination



In Korea, affirmative actions that aim to improve systemic gender discrimination are focused on **increasing women's participation in public sectors and decision-making positions.**

Under the guidelines of relevant government departments, each institute has autonomy in setting their targets for improving women's representation and makes efforts to achieve those targets in a gradual and flexible manner. Progress in achieving the targets is being tracked and monitored through performance review, evaluation indicators and public announcement.

Main Content of Affirmative Actions to Improve Gender Discrimination

Affirmative actions are classified into **quota system, target system/monitoring system**, and are found in the related systems of public sector, politics, employment, and corporate decision-making bodies.



| Main systems | Content |
|--|---|
| Plan for improving women's representation in public sector | Each institution in 12 public domains including public institutes, public officials, teachers, military personnel, and police officers set five-year targets, monitor the progress, and publicly announce the performance at government level. |
| Candidate gender quotas | Under the proportional representation system, 50% of the parliamentary candidates should be women. It is also recommended that 30% of the parliamentary candidates for local constituencies should be women. |
| Affirmative actions for improving employment | Private companies should prepare and submit information about the proportion of women among the total employees and among managers. Businesses below certain employment criteria should submit an affirmative action plan. |
| Employment/promotion quotas for women scientists/engineers | Recommend 126 research institutes (government-funded research institutes, national/public research institutes, and research institutes affiliated with public corporations) to hire and promote women scientists and engineers to account for a certain percentage every year. They monitor the implementation of the quota system. |
| Expansion of women's participation in the corporate decision-making bodies | When businesses over a certain size establish the board of directors, they should make sure that a certain gender does not account for the total directors of the board. |

The Necessity for Affirmative Actions to Enhance Women's Representation



Public sector

Women's representation increased in diverse sectors. However, women's representation reached 30% only among principals and vice-principals at schools.



Politics

Since the enforcement of the law that made it mandatory to assign over 50% of the seats for proportional representation candidates to women, women's representation among parliamentarians was expected to increase. But women's representation at the National Assembly has been below 20% for 10 years.

The Necessity for Affirmative Actions to Enhance Women's Representation



Employment

The number of women employees increased in the businesses that are subject to affirmative actions for employment improvement. However, their affirmative actions have not contributed to increasing the proportion of women in the total employees. In the research institutes that are subject to employment/promotion quotas, women account for less than 30% among the total incumbent employees.

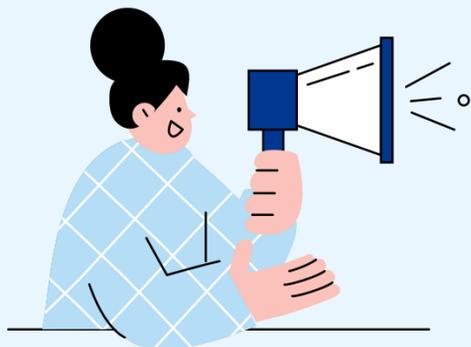


Corporate decision-making bodies

As of 2019, women executives take up 3.7% of the total executives in the top 500 companies in Korea. More than 60% of the companies are not appointing women executives. The legal ground for increasing women's representation was established in as late as 2020, and has not yet produced significant effect.

Ideas for Policy Improvement

In order to implement affirmative action more effectively, **accurate information about affirmative action-related systems, grounds, and issues** should be provided in a systematic manner. Based on such information, **we need to seek ways to improve affirmative actions as a gender equality policy.**



1 Visualize and link discrimination to affirmative action policies.

2 Establish a valid ground for setting a target.



3 Conduct monitoring and make improvement to ensure a substantial increase in women's representation.

For more details, please refer to the Korean Women's Development Institute Website- Publications & Issues- KWDI Brief.

Korean Women's Development Institute ISSUE PAPER

Publisher: Korean Women's Development Institute
Publication Date: February 28, 2023

KWDI ISSUE PAPER

Research Title: Affirmative Action in Korea
Principal Researcher: Kyoung Hee Ma, Senior Research Fellow

Current Status of Affirmative Action and Improvement Measures

Abstract

- In Korea, affirmative action is mainly applied in three areas: educational opportunities, recruitment, and decision-making positions. It is targeted not only at women, but also other groups that are marginalized in society due to structural inequality, such as people with disabilities, low-income people, and people from non-Capital regions. Affirmative action programs aimed to address gender discrimination are focused on expanding women's participation in decision-making positions in the public sector.
- The quota system that sets the proportion or number of people of a certain group among the final selected people is being implemented in the selection systems targeting people with disabilities, low-income people, and people from non-Capital regions. The quota system targeting women is applied only to the nomination of proportional representation candidates for the National Assembly and local councils and to the recruitment of military and police officers. The mandatory quotas for the nomination of female proportional representation candidates for the National Assembly and local councils are based on law. The quota system for the recruitment of female military and police officers has no legal basis. It is claimed that the latter is to "increase women's participation", but in fact, it is not aimed to address gender discrimination, but is a reverse quota that restricts the proportion of women from expanding beyond a certain level.
- Affirmative action programs aimed to increase the participation of women in decision-making positions of the public sector use a target system, not the quota system, as a main means of implementation. In other words, those programs are implemented loosely and flexibly as each institution sets its own target under the guidelines of its governing ministry, and normative pressure, such as performance checks, the reflection of evaluation indicators, and publication, is used to encourage the implementation of the programs. South Korea has no legal basis for a "tie-break" policy favoring women in recruitment when their qualifications tie men's which has been implemented in many EU countries that have long implemented affirmative action programs focusing on gender equality in employment. The target systems in South Korea do not have means strong enough to raise controversy related to this.

KWDI Please cite this paper as follows.
Issue Paper Kyoung Hee Ma (2021). Affirmative Action in Korea. Seoul: Korean Women's Development Institute.