

## Abstract

# Political consciousness and empowerment of young women in South Korea

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Recently, the active political participation of young women has gained significant attention in both online and offline spaces in South Korea. In addition, a number of indices show that young women have both high political efficacy and the tendency of progressivism. However, young women in South Korea have yet to be recognized as active agents in politics and to secure due representation in representative bodies. The underrepresentation of young women in politics provides a structural cause to women's limited political representation in general by impeding the creation

of a pool of potential female politicians.

Youth political representation is gaining increasing attention on the international stage. For example, a number of international organizations, including the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations, have chosen the expansion of opportunities for young people to participate in politics as an important goal, highlighting that the active participation of youth and youth groups is necessary across the entire spectrum of democracy in order for the earnest implementation and advancement of democracy.

In this study, we contemplate how to promote young women's political empowerment and representation with a focus on young party members, who have taken a step closer to the established political system by joining political parties. We conducted an online survey of 975 members from eight parties in the 29-39 age bracket. With an aim to obtain more detailed information, we also performed in-depth interviews with 16 young members from four parties and eight heads of youth groups in eight parties, former and incumbent young female politicians, and young female political candidates.

Our research clearly shows a difference in political consciousness between young female members and young male members of political party. Compared to their male counterparts, female members at 19-39 years of age were more likely to participate in online petitions and boycott campaigns, were ideologically more progressive, and had greater political efficacy. Young women were also more likely to join political parties through the encouragement of people around them. Compared to male party members in the same age bracket, young female members had a greater awareness of gender inequality in their party structures. They recognized the importance of both equal opportunities for men and women and

gender equality in the operation and culture of their political organization if the party desires to expand their base among young people.

Young female members expressed strong support for gender issues such as the introduction of anti-stalking legislation and a cabinet with an equal number of men and women. As for urgent youth issues or policies that they want to pursue if elected as a party officer, young women chose gender equality and gender conflict. Only 5.85% of both male and female survey participants have actually run for elections. Twenty seven percent have considered running for election and 74.5% of them were intending to run at the time of survey. Although the number of those who considered running for election was greater among men than among women, there was no gender difference in the actual intention to run or in the experience of having been suggested to run.

Based on these findings, we make following suggestions. First, institutional reform to promote the political participation and representation of youth, particularly young women, is needed. Such reform may include lowering the minimum age for voting and party membership, comprehensive reform in the election system, introduction of a youth quota in party nomination, and increased youth participation in the nomination process. This research also recommends political parties to secure budgets for young female members, establish a code of ethics on gender equality, encourage young women's groups, promote young female leadership, and put in place support programs for young female candidates.