

Research Title

Young Politicians' Gender Equality Awareness: Prospects and Challenges for Changing Political Culture

Principal Investigator

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Young Politicians' Gender Equality Awareness and Political Culture

Abstract

- ▶ Amid growing public attention to gender conflict in Korean society, particularly among younger generations, the number of young people participating in politics has also increased. In this context, this study examines the extent to which young politicians reflect the gender equality perspectives and key concerns of young voters, while also exploring potential changes in political culture associated with the rise of young politicians.
- ▶ The findings reveal that young politicians exhibited substantially higher levels of gender equality awareness than young voters. In addition, their perception that Korean society is unequal toward women was comparable to that of female respondents, indicating that young politicians exhibited markedly higher levels of gender equality awareness than young voters overall.
 - The areas in which respondents most strongly anticipated changes in political culture were, in order, political participation regardless of gender, a less hierarchical organizational culture, greater trust, and improved communication and balance.
 - Gender differences were also observed in the policy areas prioritized by young politicians in their political activities. Among young female politicians, the primary policy interests included women's issues (36.5%), youth issues (30.8%), issues concerning socially disadvantaged groups and minorities (30.8%), and gender equality (30.8%). In contrast, the main policy interests of young male politicians were youth issues (24.5%), the economy and employment (24.5%), discrimination and inequality (22.4%), and the environment (22.4%).
 - Gender differences likewise emerged in relation to the difficulties experienced during political activities. Young female politicians reported challenges associated with gender-discriminatory political culture, particularly in networking with established politicians and participating in party activities.
 - Although an overall increase in young politicians may contribute to the development of a more gender-equal political culture, the findings suggest that a further increase in the number of young female politicians is particularly likely to strengthen attention to gender equality issues and the interests of young women.
- ▶ Based on these findings, the study offers several policy recommendations. First, Korean society should promote the development of gender equality awareness through school- and community-based civic education beginning in adolescence. Second, legal and institutional reforms are needed to reduce the financial burden faced by young politicians during electoral participation. Third, political parties should ensure meaningful participation by young people and women in major decision-making processes in order to cultivate young political leaders and build broader consensus on youth-related issues. Finally, institutional mechanisms should be established to ensure that political organizations, including the National Assembly and local councils, operate in a gender-responsive manner.

* This paper was produced by extracting and summarizing parts of a research report from the Korean Women's Development Institute. Kim, E., Kim, B., Kim, J., Yeom, H., Kim, M., & Jeung, H. (2024). Young Politicians' Gender Equality Awareness: Prospects and Challenges for Changing Political Culture. Seoul: Korean Women's Development Institute.

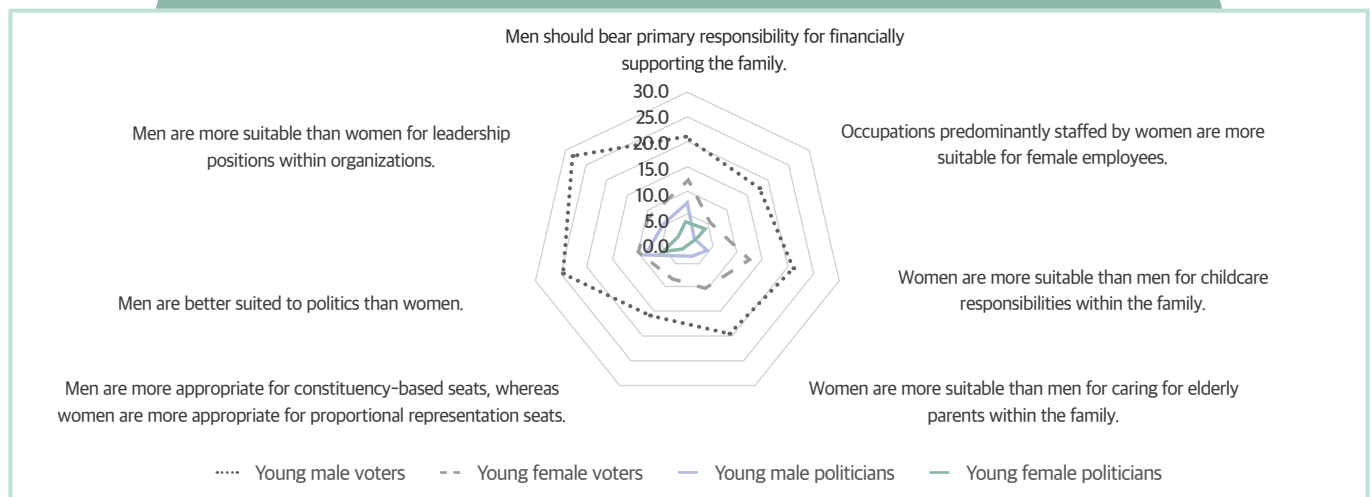
1 Background and Key Issues

- ▶ Gender conflict among younger generations, particularly those in their twenties and thirties, has attracted considerable media attention and become increasingly prominent in Korean society. At the same time, perceptions that women experience gender inequality across various social domains have tended to be stronger among older generations than among younger generations. In recent elections, not only has the number of young female candidates increased, but many have also campaigned on platforms incorporating feminist policy agendas, making the growing presence of young female politicians more visible than ever before.
- ▶ Against this backdrop, this study examines differences in gender equality awareness between young voters and young politicians, as well as gender differences among young politicians themselves. The study further explores whether younger generations hold perspectives on gender equality that differ from those of older generations, how youth interests are represented within the political sphere, and what challenges young politicians face in sustaining their political careers. In addition, the study investigates whether the expansion of youth political participation may lead to more active discussion of gender equality policies and examines the types of changes in political culture that may result from this shift.

2 Expectations Regarding Gender Equality Awareness and Policy Promotion among Young Politicians

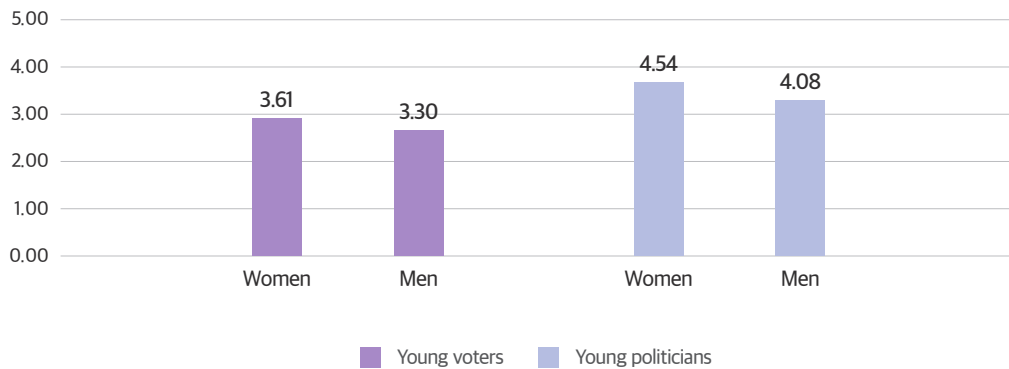
- ▶ Both young politicians and young voters demonstrated above-average levels of gender equality awareness and considerable interest in gender equality issues. Across all survey items related to gender stereotypes, young politicians exhibited consistently higher levels of gender equality awareness than young voters. However, whereas gender differences were relatively pronounced among young voters, such differences were relatively limited among young politicians. Interest in gender equality issues was generally higher among women than among men, and young politicians demonstrated greater interest in these issues than young voters overall.

**Comparison of Agreement Rates (%) on Gender Equality Awareness Items:
Young Voters vs. Young Politicians**



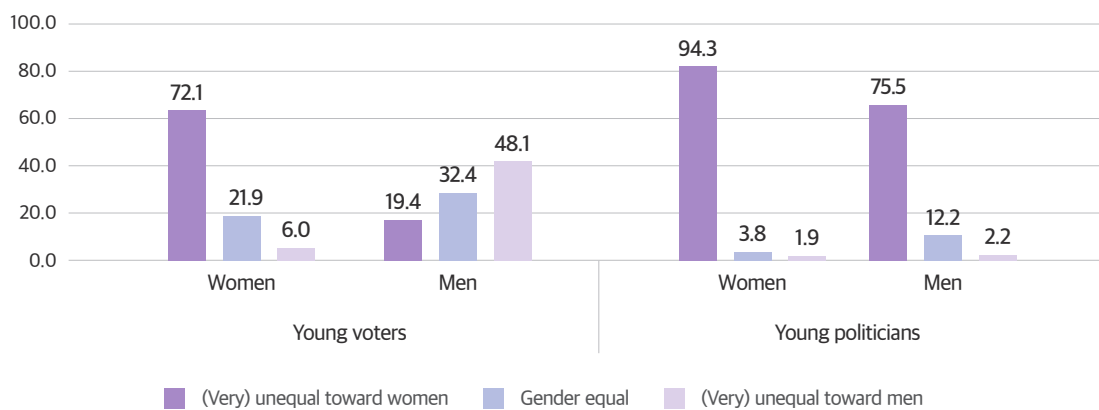
Note: Comparisons are based on mean scores measured using a five-point scale.

Comparison of Mean Levels of Interest in Gender Equality Issues: Young Voters vs. Young Politicians

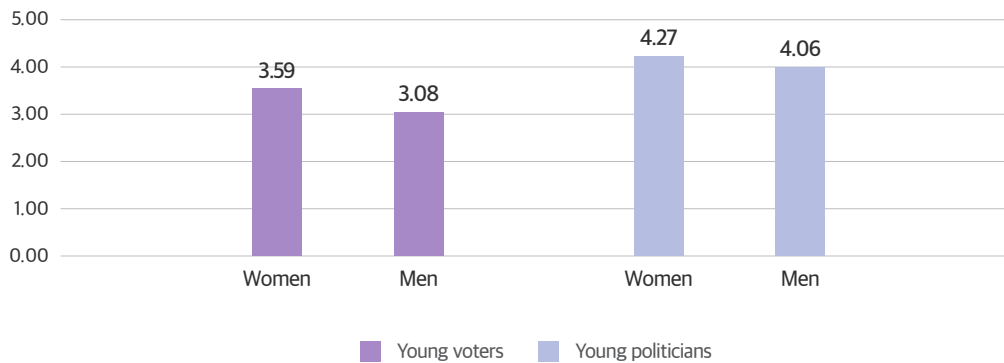


- Perceptions of the level of gender equality in Korean society also differed substantially between young male and female voters. In contrast, among young politicians, both men and women reported very high levels of agreement that Korean society remains unequal toward women, and the gender differences in responses were relatively limited. Young politicians were also considerably more supportive of gender equality policies than young voters, while gender differences in policy support were again less pronounced among young politicians.

Comparison of Perceptions of Gender Equality in Korean Society: Young Voters vs. Young Politicians



Comparison of Mean Scores for Support for Gender Equality Policies (5-Point Scale): Young Voters vs. Young Politicians



- (Expectations Regarding the Contribution of Youth Politics to the Advancement of Gender Equality) Findings from the in-depth interviews revealed two contrasting perspectives regarding the extent to which youth politics may contribute to the advancement of gender equality. One perspective emphasized that young politicians differ from politicians of older generations in meaningful ways and therefore possess greater capacity for communication, empathy, and mutual understanding. The other perspective argued that, particularly among young male politicians, being young does not necessarily imply a strong understanding of gender equality issues, as such issues are often not regarded as policy priorities. From this perspective, an increase in the number of young male politicians alone would not necessarily lead to substantial progress in gender equality.
- Participants also emphasized that 'young politicians' should not be regarded as a homogeneous group. Rather, distinctions between young men and young women inevitably emerge within youth politics itself. In this regard, many respondents argued that young women are more likely to advocate for women's issues and gender equality, thereby underscoring the need to further increase the number of young female politicians. This perspective may be interpreted as a response to the historically male-dominated political culture in which established female politicians have often faced limitations in voicing women's concerns and advancing gender equality issues.
 - Nevertheless, most respondents agreed that young politicians, on average, possess higher levels of gender equality awareness than the general public. Accordingly, many anticipated that an increase in the number of young politicians would contribute to the broader diffusion of gender equality discourse within the political sphere and increase the number of political actors committed to promoting and practicing gender equality.

3 Expected Changes in Political Culture as the Number of Young Politicians Increases

- ▶ To examine expected changes in political culture associated with an increase in young politicians, a survey was conducted among young voters and young politicians focusing on political participation, political trust, a shift from hierarchical and authoritarian political culture to a more horizontal culture, and communication and balance within politics.
- Regarding expected changes in political culture resulting from an increase in young politicians, young voters reported above-average expectations across all four categories, while young politicians reported substantially higher expectations than young voters overall.
- Across genders, respondents most strongly anticipated changes in the following areas, in order: political participation, a more horizontal political culture, political trust, and communication and balance. However, with respect to political trust, young female voters reported the lowest level of expectation.

	Gender	Young Voters	Young Politicians
Political Participation	Women	3.60	3.81
	Men	3.47	3.70
Political Trust	Women	3.02	3.35
	Men	3.11	3.19
Less Hierarchical Organizational Culture	Women	3.08	3.43
	Men	3.04	3.20
Communication and Balance	Women	3.03	3.21
	Men	3.04	3.04

- ▶ Respondents were also asked whether an increase in young politicians would lead to greater political attention to three major issues: low birth rates and population aging, gender equality, and climate and environmental issues. Both young voters and young politicians reported above-average expectations across all three issue areas.
- The largest proportion of respondents anticipated that discussions related to climate and environmental issues would become more active as the number of young politicians increases, followed by issues concerning low birth rates and population aging, and then gender equality issues. Unlike young voters, male respondents within the group of young politicians reported relatively high expectations regarding the expansion of discussions on gender equality issues. This result appears to reflect the relatively high level of support among respondents affiliated with minor or extra-parliamentary political parties.

	Gender	Young Voters	Young Politicians
Low Birth Rates and Population Aging	Women	3.18	3.42
	Men	3.25	3.65
Gender Equality	Women	3.13	3.29
	Men	3.11	3.41
Climate and Environment	Women	3.30	3.83
	Men	3.14	3.84

4 Policy Interests Influencing Political Participation (Combined 1st-3rd Rankings)

- ▶ Clear gender differences emerged in the policy areas that young politicians considered most important. Overall, the most frequently cited policy interests were youth issues (27.7%), issues concerning socially disadvantaged groups and minorities (22.8%), and gender equality and women's issues (20.8% each).
- When responses were analyzed by gender, young female politicians identified women's issues (36.5%), youth issues (30.8%), issues concerning socially disadvantaged groups and minorities (30.8%), and gender equality (30.8%) as their primary policy interests. In contrast, young male politicians prioritized youth issues (24.5%), the economy and employment (24.5%), discrimination and inequality (22.4%), and environmental issues (22.4%), highlighting clear gender differences in policy priorities among young politicians.

Policy Interest Keywords	Total (n=101)	Gender	
		Women (n=52)	Men (n=49)
Youth	28 (27.7)	16 (30.8)	12 (24.5)
Issues concerning socially disadvantaged groups and minorities (e.g., older adults, persons with disabilities, children, and adolescents)	23 (22.8)	16 (30.8)	7 (14.3)
Gender equality	21 (20.8)	16 (30.8)	5 (10.2)
Women's issues	21 (20.8)	19 (36.5)	2 (4.1)
Economy and employment	19 (18.8)	7 (13.5)	12 (24.5)
Discrimination and inequality	17 (16.8)	6 (11.5)	11 (22.4)
Environment	16 (15.8)	5 (9.6)	11 (22.4)

* Policy interest keywords were derived by categorizing terms directly provided by respondents in an open-ended survey question.

5 Difficulties in the Political Career Development of Young Politicians

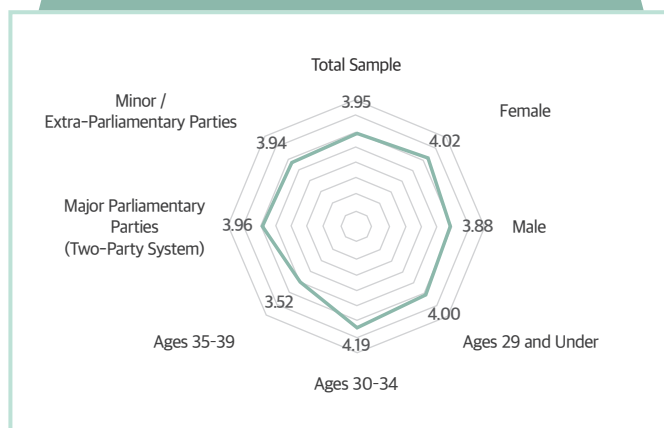
- **Balancing Work and Political Activities, and Challenges Related to Electoral Law**
 - ▶ Both male and female young politicians identified two major difficulties in their political activities: balancing political activities with paid employment and navigating electoral systems and election laws characterized by high entry barriers.
- **Gender-Discriminatory Practices and Political Culture in Political Activities**
 - ▶ A comparison of mean scores across ten categories of difficulties by gender indicates that women generally experienced greater challenges than men.
 - ▶ Young female politicians identified several major obstacles, including low levels of gender equality awareness within political parties (11.5%), gender-based negative attitudes and prejudice toward young politicians (7.7%), unequal treatment of female politicians within parties (5.8%), and the absence of systematic political education and training programs to support the development and advancement of female politicians (5.8%). Collectively, these findings suggest the continued presence of gender-discriminatory practices within political activity and party organization.

- ▶ Such gender-discriminatory practices and organizational cultures appeared to pose more severe barriers for young female politicians affiliated with the two major political parties. In contrast, minor or extra-parliamentary parties were generally perceived as more receptive to gender equality norms. These smaller parties were more likely to provide internal gender equality education and to incorporate feminist values as part of a broader progressive political orientation. By comparison, such a political culture supportive of gender equality was perceived as less developed within the two major parties.

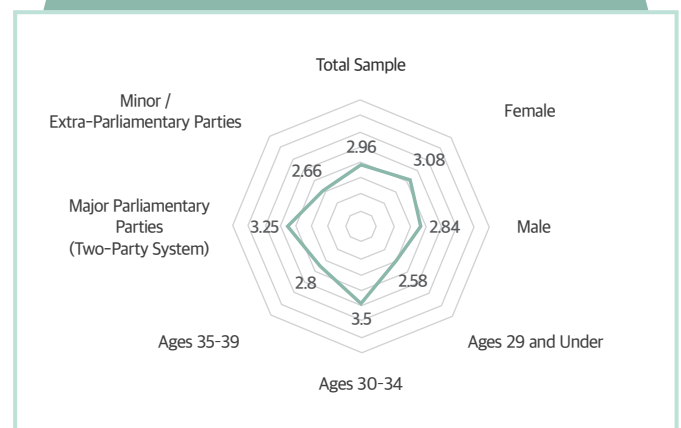
● Networks and Conflicts with Established Politicians

- ▶ Young politicians affiliated with the two major political parties also reported difficulties related to conflicts with established politicians and limited access to key intra-party networks. In contrast, minor or extra-parliamentary parties generally provided relatively easier access to party nomination processes, and young politicians were more likely to receive party nominations. In the two major parties, however, intense competition for nominations made relationships with established politicians significantly more consequential for political advancement.
- ▶ As a result, young politicians within the two major parties tended to invest greater effort than their counterparts in smaller parties in building and maintaining personal networks with influential party figures.
- ▶ An examination of individuals who entered the National Assembly as ‘young politicians’ suggests that most were not individuals who had progressed gradually through party structures, but rather figures recruited from outside politics who had already attained public recognition through their professional expertise. These findings highlight the need to establish stronger institutional pathways that enable young politicians to develop their careers within party organizations in a more systematic and sustainable manner.

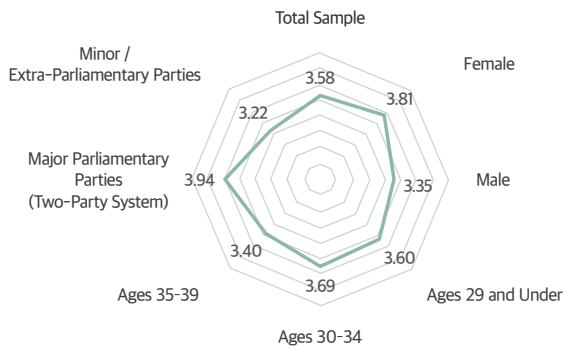
Difficulty in Balancing Political Activities with Paid Employment



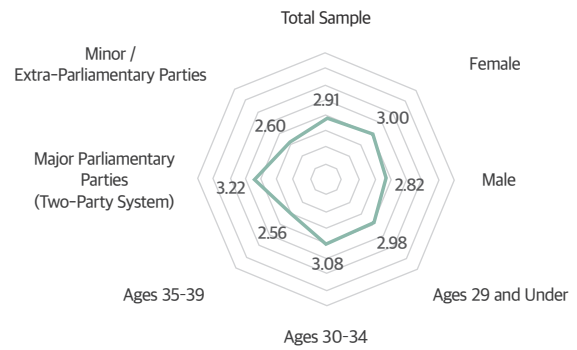
Difficulty in Balancing Political Activities with Childcare and Domestic Responsibilities



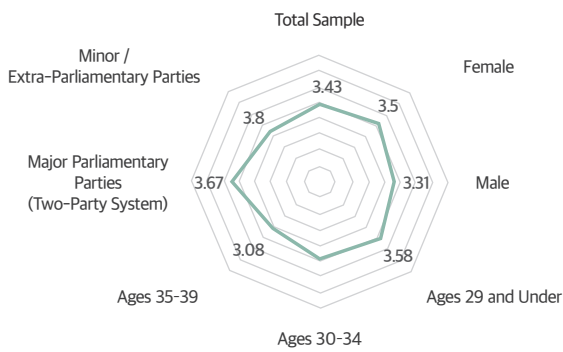
Ratio of Local Government Young Women's Wages to the National Average Male Youth Wage by City/County/District (2023)



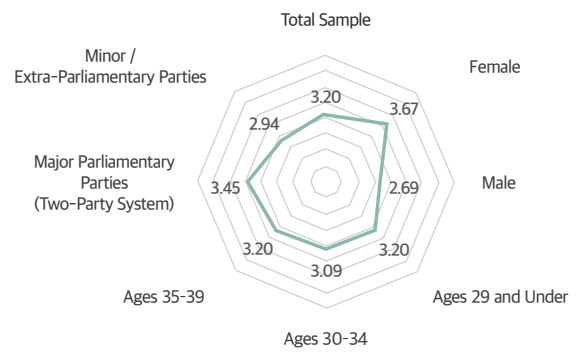
Difficulty in Building Networks and Interacting with Senior Political Elites within Political Parties



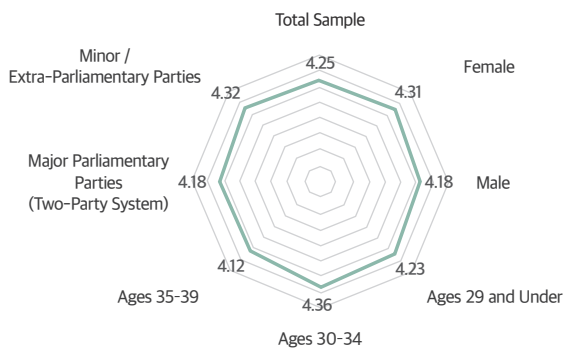
Difficulty Arising from Negative Attitudes and Prejudice toward Young Politicians Based on Generational Perceptions



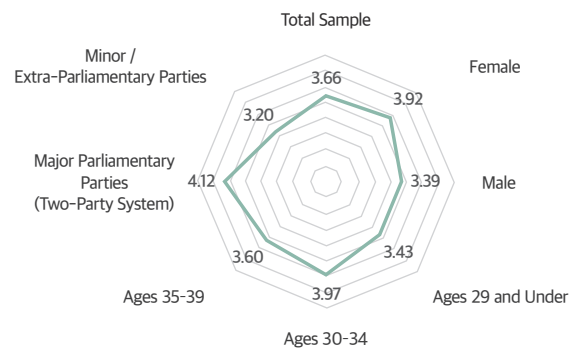
Difficulty Arising from Gender-Based Negative Attitudes and Prejudice toward Young Politicians



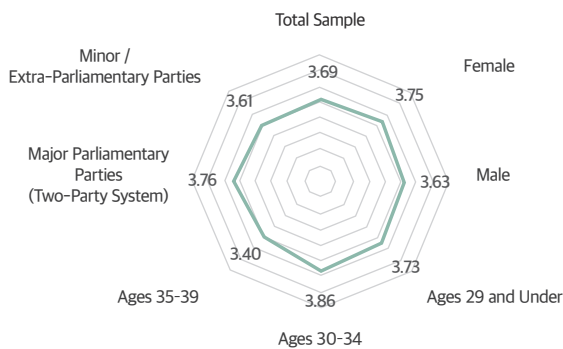
Difficulty Arising from High Barriers to Entry in the Electoral System (e.g., Deposits, Campaign Costs)



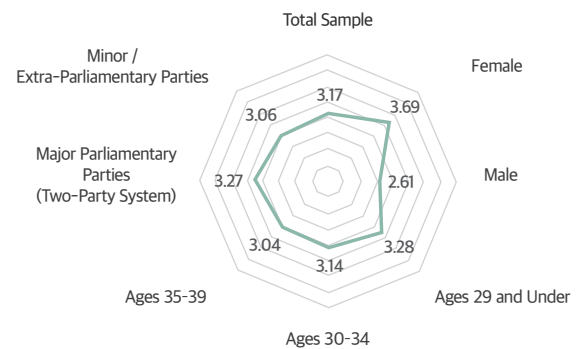
Difficulties Arising from the Short-Term Electoral Use of Young Politicians by Political Parties



Difficulty in Organizing Electoral Campaign Teams



Difficulty in Building Women's Networks and Exchanging Information due to the Low Proportion of Female Politicians



6 Policy Measures for Building a Gender-Equal Political Culture

▶ To foster a political culture that is responsive to gender equality, foundational conditions must be strengthened across multiple dimensions. This study suggests that gender equality education should begin at the elementary school level. Accordingly, the first policy recommendation emphasizes the need to reinforce gender equality awareness in political education for children and adolescents, as well as to expand in-service training on gender equality for teachers responsible for delivering such education.

1) Expanding Political Participation Opportunities for Children and Adolescents and Ensuring Gender-Sensitive Governance

- A. Expansion and gender-sensitive operation of the Korea Children's National Assembly
- B. Gender-sensitive operation of youth parliaments

2) Strengthening Democratic Citizenship Education and Gender Equality Training for Teachers

▶ One of the key difficulties identified by young politicians was the financial burden associated with electoral participation, particularly in relation to campaign financing and the structure of the electoral system. From the perspective of young politicians who must simultaneously balance both political activities and paid work, institutional barriers to political entry should be minimized. Accordingly, the second policy recommendation proposes easing regulatory constraints under the election laws and Political Funds Act for young candidates.

3) Easing Deposit Requirements for Young Candidates through Amendments to the Public Official Election Act

4) Revising Eligibility Criteria for Youth Candidate Subsidies under the Political Funds Act

- ▶ Institutional mechanisms that support the development of young politicians within political parties remain insufficient. In particular, young female politicians reported experiencing discrimination within parties on the basis of both age and gender. This reflects broader societal gender biases that are also reproduced within political institutions. The persistence of male-centered political culture among older generations continues to constitute a major barrier to the political advancement of young women within party structures. In addition, participation by young people in intra-party decision-making bodies is not yet clearly institutionalized. Therefore, this study proposes expanding the representation of both young people and women in party decision-making structures, thereby enabling young politicians — regardless of gender — to more fully develop their political capacities within party organizations.

5) Guaranteeing 30% Representation of Youth and Women in Party Decision-Making Bodies

- ▶ Within a male-dominated political culture, it remains difficult for both youth-related and gender-related issues to achieve sustained consensus, and the lack of substantive representation limits the institutional continuity of these agendas within legislative bodies. Given that voters place high expectations on candidates — particularly young candidates — regarding gender equality awareness and policy commitment, political institutions such as the National Assembly and local councils should function in a more gender-responsive manner.

6) Establishment of a (Provisional) Youth Special Committee within the National Assembly and Metropolitan Councils

7) Enhancing Gender Sensitivity in Local Council Operations

- A. Establishment of a gender equality specialist officer system within local councils
- B. Introduction of remote voting mechanisms to prevent career disruptions among young female council members

Supervising Agencies	National Election Commission of the Republic of Korea; National Assembly of the Republic of Korea
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Related Agencies	National Assembly Research Service; relevant political parties
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