

# **SOUTH KOREAN WOMEN AT THE END OF THE SECOND MILLENNIUM**

**GRADE LEVEL:** High School

**SUBJECT:** Social Studies, Women's Issues

**TIME REQUIRED:** One to two class periods

**OBJECTIVE:**

To understand the historical roots of the role of South Korean women as well as their status in society today.

**MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

Handout: The South Korean Woman at the End of the Second Millennium (attached)

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Assign the Introduction and Historical Perspective for homework.
2. Have a brief discussion on what has led to the inferior position of women in Korean society and what might now be contributing to a change in that status.
3. Divide students into groups of about four each. Half the groups should read the handout on "Women, The Economy and the Workplace" and half should read on "Gender and Society" including on "Women and Government." Each group should note the negative conditions for women as well as the ways in which culture and law have contributed to empowering women.
4. Groups should then list their findings on the board and summarize for the class.
5. A full class discussion should ensue concerning the prospects for women in South Korean Society. What are the indications for improved circumstances? What hindrances remain?

**EVALUATION:**

Listen in on the group discussion and take note of class participation.

The next test or homework assignment could pose the following question:

Compare and contrast the role of contemporary South Korean women with the role of modern American women.

# **THE SOUTH KOREAN WOMAN AT THE END OF THE SECOND MILLENNIUM**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Generally speaking, women over the world, regardless of nationality, have less education, less power, less money, and fewer opportunities than their male counterparts. This situation has been the case for centuries, in fact for hundreds of centuries. This lesser role, for the most part, was designed by men, but was accepted and even vigorously propagated by women. In the latter part of the twentieth century, changes, albeit at a snail's pace, have begun. Perhaps the catalyst for these changes occurred when the United Nations designated 1976-1985 the Decade for Women and when the UN General Assembly, in 1979, adopted the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women."

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Until the end of the fourteenth century, when Confucian thought was adopted by the founders of the Chosŏn kingdom (1392-1910) as the basis of their sociopolitical program, women enjoyed much more equality. Confucianism introduced into Korean society the principle of agnation: it made men the only structural relevant members of society and relegated women to social dependence. Before the Chosŏn period, women enjoyed certain rights. For example, rights to inheritance were equal during the Koryŏ Kingdom (918-1392). Also, during the Silla period (668-918), three queens ruled Korea in their own right.

With the introduction of Confucianism came male dominance. A woman was subservient first to her father, then her husband, and then, as a widow, to her son. A married woman was completely controlled by her husband and could be abandoned if she were guilty of one of seven evils: failure to bear a son, disobedience to in-laws, jealousy of the husband's concubine, contracting an incurable disease, malicious gossip, adultery, or theft. The wife had no such rights. After a girl married, she was never expected to enter her parents' home again. She was expected to become part of the husband's family or perish. Widows, even young ones, were to serve their in-laws and not remarry. During the Chosŏn period, which ended in 1910, women's lives were limited to the domestic sphere. Rituals were closed to them except when food preparation was required. A noble woman kept a knife in her robe to protect herself from attack or rape. If a woman was raped she was expected to commit suicide. Because men were the respected gender of society, when a daughter was born there was no joy.

Since the Korean War, the status of Korean women has gradually begun to change. Nonetheless, the woman's domain is still considered to consist primarily of the domestic sphere while males dominate the public arena.

## **WOMEN, THE ECONOMY, AND THE WORKPLACE**

- Until the early 1970s, a woman could not work unless her husband was ill or she was a widow.
- In 1980, 42.8 percent of women were in the workforce, and in 1995, that number increased to 48.3 percent.
- Women in the workforce generally are employed at small companies with little possibility of promotion.
- A miniscule 0.1 percent of all women workers were in management positions in 1991.
- Women are discriminated against openly. If there is gender competition for a position, the male will be selected.
- By law, discrimination in salary between the genders is illegal, but in reality it exists.
- Between 1980 and 1988, South Korea reported the highest wage difference between men and women among the twenty-one countries that reported to the International Labor Organization (ILO 1991 statistics).
- Publicly, many South Korean companies support equal opportunity for women. However, when women are ready to be promoted to higher management jobs they meet a concrete ceiling. Businesses still believe women are not a good investment because they eventually leave the workforce to have a family.
- Only 3.2 percent of Korean women are employed in the legal profession.
- South Korean firms are male governed and lack career opportunities and equal benefits for women. Therefore, many women seek employment with foreign firms where career advancement is more equal (*Business Korea* 9, no. 9 [March 1992]: 31).
- In 1992, the Korean Women Workers Association United (KWWAU) was founded to ensure equality in the workplace and improve childcare for working mothers.
- Some businesses are making concerted efforts to stop sexual harassment in the workplace.
- The male wage earner hands over his salary to his wife. She manages family finances.
- Many housewives join savings clubs called *kye* where they pool their savings. These savings are invested in property or in the stock market. A recent Gallup poll indicates that out of 2.5 million Korean investors, 32 percent are women, and many have become prosperous (*The Economist* 311, no. 7597 [April 8, 1989]: 42).
- Many women, though they have entered the workforce, are still required to retain their traditional household chores.
- Male office workers are expected to socialize after work and often drink with their colleagues.

## **GENDER AND SOCIETY**

- In 1993, 115.6 male babies were born for every 100 female babies. In 1995, for ages six to eleven there were 200,000 more males than females. It is estimated that by 2010 there will be 128 single men of marriageable age for every 100 females of marriageable age. In 1999, sonograms to determine the sex of the baby were decreed illegal.
- It is estimated that 300,000 female fetuses have been aborted in the last ten years.
- Women do not take on their husband's name when married. This practice has nothing to do with women's liberation. It is founded on the tradition that families are based on blood ties – male blood ties.
- Until recently, mothers had no legal right to their children when divorced. The child still belongs to the father, but the mother could gain custody.
- Five of the seven works awarded Korea's top literary prize in 1998 were written by women.

- Ewha Womans University is the largest university for women in the world.
- In the 1930s, 71.7 percent of all marriages were decided by parents only. In 1980 it dropped to a mere 1.3 percent.
- Today, ritual services to ancestors can be performed by women. The head of a family can be a woman.
- The year 1996 witnessed South Korea's first women's week.
- In 1998, a five-year plan was initiated to advance the status of women.
- South Korea has a sexual harassment law.
- In April 1999, a pension law was passed that permits a woman to demand one-half of the man's pension after a divorce.
- Up until 1996 girls needed a score of 138 on a high school entrance test to be admitted to elite schools; boys needed only 117. This situation has now changed, and boys and girls need the same score to enter.
- Shooting pool has long been considered a male-only sport. However, South Korea now has pool halls designated especially for women.
- Shamanism is one of South Korea's popular belief systems. Shamans are women.
- Korean chess does not have a queen.

#### **WOMEN IN POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT:**

- Since 1948, there has been one woman mayor in all of South Korea.
- Until 1991, there have been only nine Cabinet members who were women.
- In 1999, a woman was appointed as Minister of the Environment. The president of a major Korean newspaper is a woman journalist.
- By 2002, all government committees were to be composed of at least 30 percent women. At the end of the twentieth century only 13 percent women.
- Around 900,000 women work for the South Korean Government. Only 2 percent are in the upper management. The remainder are in the lower ranks even though 70 percent of these women are college graduates (1992 data).
- The average representation of women in the National Assembly is around a mere 2 percent.