

Professions and Gender in My Country

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In 1998, in the middle of the period called the “IMF Times” in Korea, the country’s ratio of women participating in economic activities rapidly increased to 47.1 %. This was followed by a gradual increase to 50.1 % in 2005, reaching 50.3 % in 2006. After the country faced the global financial crisis in 2009, however, the ratio fell back to 49.2 %. Meanwhile, according to OECD’s aggregation formula, Korea’s ratio of women participating in economic activities in 2009 reached 53.9 %. This percentage was considerably lower than the OECD average at 61.3 %, Japan at 62.9 % and the U.S. at 69 %.

At the same time, the number of working women reached 9.914 million in Korea in 2010. I was happy to read a news article reporting that the number was larger than that before the global financial crisis.

Working Women by Profession (2005 - 2010)

Unit: 1,000 persons, %

	2005		2010	
Council members, high-level executives, and management staff	45	0.5	53	0.5
Specialists	1,624	17.0	2,030	20.5
Clerks	1,654	17.4	1,768	17.8
Service staff	2,068	21.7	1,614	16.3
Sales staff	1,449	15.2	1,540	15.5
Agricultural and fishery workers	765	8.0	588	5.9
Skilled workers	388	4.1	325	3.3
Device and machine operation and assembly workers	349	3.7	329	3.3
Those engaged in simple labor	1,183	12.4	1,667	16.8
Total	9,525	100.0	9,914	100.0

Source: Website of the National Statistical Office of Korea and the Asia Economy Newspaper Feb. 15.

According to the above table for working women by profession, the number of women working as “specialists” stood at 1.624 million in 2005, following that of “service staff” and “clerks”. In 2010, the number increased to 2.03 million, making “specialists” the

most common profession for women. Also, the percentage of women working as “white-collar workers,” such as “council members, high-level executives, and management staff”, as well as “specialists” and “clerks,” rose significantly from 34.9 % to 38.8 %.

Next, I would like to focus on a substantial increase in the number of women “engaged in simple labor.” I think that this is not very favorable not only to women themselves but also to Korea’s society as a whole. The increase in white-collar workers leads to the increase of incomes, enabling quantity and quality growth. However, a considerable increase of those engaged in simple labor leads to the decrease of incomes, preventing quantity and quality growth. It is highly likely that this will eventually generate a larger income gap between the two professions. This is a very important problem. I think that the time is coming to discuss seriously how to resolve this problem.

Finally, I would like to pay attention to “skilled workers,” as well as “device and machine operation and assembly workers.” Generally, it is said that such workers are usually men. Although some efforts should be made to gradually increase the number of female workers committed to such professions, the number of female “skilled workers”, and “device and machine operation and assembly workers” declined by 83,000 (63,000 in the former and 20,000 in the latter) over the past five years. This is a difficult situation for women.

The female workforce is essential to the development of the Korean economy. Despite the same old male-oriented atmosphere in job training and job selection, women are now required to make active attempts to broaden their horizons, believing that women can do what men can do. Moreover, the government must extend its commitment to providing more educational opportunities for women, and creating an environment that encourages many more women to work, which will expand the range of options of professions for women.