CIVIL SOCIETY, GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

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1. Civil Society and Social Progress

“Our times demand a new definition of leadership – global leadership. They demand a new constellation of international cooperation – governments, civil society and the private sector, working together for a collective global good.”

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon
Speech at World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland (29 January 2009)

The civil society is a critical component in a tripartite system together with the governments and the private sector, not only at the global level but also at the national level. A close cooperation especially between the government and the civil society is needed in every decision on major social policies. Social progress cannot be achieved without critical and constructive engagement of the civil society.

1.1 Civil Society in Korea

The presence of active and proactive civil society makes democracy stronger and brings social progress. The experience of the Republic of Korea eloquently speaks to this. Despite the rather short history of civil movements in Korea, the civil society organizations (CSOs) flourished in rather a short period of time and became an influential agent of social change in the Korean society.¹ From 1987

¹ The civil society is a wide concept and includes myriads of different types of organizations. In Korea, however, it usually refers to the non-governmental organizations which are working for public goods. The rough estimate of the number of NGOs in 2004 was about 20,000. Sang-Peel Park, The Quantitative Scale of the Korean Civil Society, Korean NPO Review, Vo. 3, No. 2, October 2004.

http://www.oecdworldforum2009.org
onwards was a new era, a period of transition from the dictatorial regime to the formal inauguration of the first democratic government in 1993 and then to the consolidation of democracy until now. Tens of thousands of new CSOs sprung up. The CSOs have been successful in generating public pressure upon the government on major social issues. In particular, the Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice, founded twenty years ago in 1989, demanded new economic policies, in particular a new “real name system of all financial transactions” for transparency and combating corruption. The first civilian government was pressured to partly accept this revolutionary suggestion. The influence of the civil society, especially of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), upon the government’s policy formulation often superseded other important players such as politicians or businesses. This was possible because the NGOs succeeded in getting the trust of people for their dedicated action for the interests of the general public, while the politicians and the businesses were perceived to work for their own personal or corporate interests.

Women in Korea had also participated in the democracy movements during the military dictatorship in a sizable number and with their creative methods. While fighting for democracy, women also raised the issues of discrimination and violence against them. It is well known that the success of the Korean economic development owes much to the young Korean girls and women who worked long hours with low wages under harsh working conditions with no trade union allowed under the military rule. While women workers suffered exploitation and sexual harassment in factories, Korean women in general had to endure wife battery and patriarchal domination and control. From early 1980s, women’s organizations started to provide assistance to the victims of discrimination and violence. Korea Women’s Hotline was the pioneer organization to raise the issue of domestic violence, providing psychological counselling, and when necessary, mobilized legal as well as financial assistance to the victims. At the same time, the new feminist women’s movements joined the coalitions for democracy and became a part of major social movements since the mid 1980s.

Because of this tradition of forming coalitions against dictatorship, the Korean civil society is familiar to forming coalitions whenever there is a need to generate a big social pressure. Therefore, when there is a big environmental issue at stake, organizations working in other areas also join and become a part of the big coalition.

1.2 The Roles of the Civil Society

The CSOs, in particular NGOs, have been playing many important roles for social progress. As advocates, the NGOs make their positions on major issues and stage demonstrations, rallies, strikes, protests, etc., calling for appropriate policies and social changes. In this process, the NGOs suggest new policies and are often engaged with legislative activities, proposing new laws and revising old ones. In

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2 For history and activities of the Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice, please see www.ccej.or.kr.
3 In demonstrations, for example, women sometimes gave out roses to the riot police or wore purple colour mufflers as a symbol of democracy.
4 Korea Women’s Hot Line, founded in 1983, has now 26 branches across Korea, dealing all kinds of issues of violence against women. Please see www.hotline.or.kr.
Korea, since the early 1990s, the NGOs have been making a good use of the election process to advocate their policy demands. The presidential, general and local elections provide good opportunities for the NGOs to hold public debates, send questionnaires to find out the candidates’ views on issues.

Another conventional role of the civil society is to monitor the performance of the government and demand accountability. As watchdogs, the NGOs closely monitor government’s performance and demand accountability, in particular in the area of corruption and wrongdoings of the government officials and public institutions. Waste of tax money by the public officials, for example, whether in the form of travelling, meal treatment, over-budgeting, etc., is constantly watched and strongly criticized. Regarding the parliament, the NGOs check the attendance of the members of the National Assembly and how many bills they proposed and made into new laws. A peculiar phenomenon in Korean society is related to playing golf. Due to the expensive membership fee for the golf club and the fee for playing, as well as the frequent deals made between the politicians, public officials or business CEOs, the golf course records becomes often the subject of political surveillance.

Another important role of the civil society is service provider. When there is a lack of social security for the disadvantaged groups of people, the NGOs are filling the gap by providing the necessary social services for the vulnerable groups of people such as the disabled, poor, elderly, left-alone children or other social minorities. Many development NGOs do cross the national borders and provide humanitarian relief services to the poor in other countries or the refugees struck by the natural disasters or armed conflicts.

The civil society can also act as consultant or advisor to the government. The representatives of the civil society are invited to the advisory committees of various ministries and government agencies. In Korea, the most frequently invited categories of people are professors, lawyers, media people and NGO leaders. By offering their views and opinions, the civil society participates in the policy design, formulation, implementation or evaluation.

Many NGOs carry out some or all of the four types of roles described above. Also, the NGOs can carry out their activities at either national, regional or international levels or at more than one level. Whatever roles they play at what levels, the NGOs are agents of social change. Of course, it is also quite possible that within the civil society there can be other NGOs with conflicting views and positions. For example, the civil society is deeply divided on the issue of North Korea. Whether a certain change would be introduced or not will depend on which side would win the public opinion.5

2. Civil Society Making the Global-Local Linkages

In addition to the multiple roles played by the civil society, a new round of activities by the civil society became a trend from the 1990s. It is to make the linkage between the global and the national or

5 One such example in Korea was that the Anti-Discrimination Bill proposed in 2007 did not pass because of the objections from religious NGOs to the inclusion of discrimination based on sexual orientation. The NGOs working on the issue of disability, however, formed a coalition, staged two-month long rallies and succeeded in making a separate legislation, Disability Discrimination Act, which went effective in April 2008.
local situations. The civil society actively engaged itself with the global agenda, in setting new standards and then pursued domestic implementation of these standards. In this world of globalization, the connection between the global and local became faster and more direct than decades ago. The civil society, especially women’s NGOs, made big efforts to engage in establishing new global standards and bringing them home to the domestic level for women in their own countries.

During the 1990s, the world has seen a near explosion of NGOs, stimulated by the expanded chances of participation in the UN world conferences on important global issues such as environment, human rights, social development and women. To fight against the deeply rooted discrimination and violence, women have been organizing themselves in their own societies first, but soon made connections with women in other countries and regions. Already in the 1970s some limited number of representatives of the Women’s NGOs began to engage with the global discussion. The 1975 UN-designated International Women’s Year and the 1st UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City were followed by three more global gatherings in 1980, 1985 and 1995. During and after each conference, many new women’s organizations were established at the national, regional and international levels. Many women’s NGOs made themselves busy with studying the documents, sharing information, networking, building alliances across nations, regions and the globe.

2.1 Women’s NGOs Making the Global-Local Connections


2.1.1 Women’s NGOs and the UN World Conferences on Women

In particular, at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, more than 40,000 women have participated in the NGO Forum. Women’s NGOs prepared themselves in each country, assessing the situation of women in all areas of their lives, which they brought to the regional preparatory meetings, and to the Beijing Conference. In each country, women’s NGOs built coalitions to produce the NGO reports and selected issues they would raise at the Beijing.

The women’s NGOs raised millions of issues at the NGO Forum, but they also engaged themselves with the official meetings of the governments and made efforts to push their views and demands into the languages of the conference document, Beijing Platform for Action. Adopted by the 189 member states of the United Nations, the Beijing Platform for Action contains the strategic objectives for achieving women’s equality, development and peace in twelve critical areas of concern—from the area of poverty, education, violence, etc. and to the girl child. The Platform provides the list of tasks for the governments, and sometimes for international organizations and in some cases even for NGOs. Throughout the Platform, it was emphasized that all the member states of UN ratify the Convention on
the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and take gender mainstreaming as the most effective strategy to achieve the goal of gender equality.

After the Beijing Conference, the women’s NGOs made big efforts to disseminate the BPFA and check the implementation of the Platform by the government. The UN reviews and assessments of the level of implementation of the BPFA in each country were conducted at regular intervals of five years as Beijing+5 in 2000 and Beijing+10 in 2005. The women’s NGOs again actively engaged with these review processes. Next year in March 2010, Beijing+15 review is scheduled to be conducted during the UN Commission on the Status of Women, for which the regional preparations are currently going on, with that of the Asia Pacific region being held in October 2009.

2.1.2 Women’s NGOs and the CEDAW Monitoring

Another venue of the global-local connection is the monitoring of the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Convention). The 186 states parties to the Convention are obliged to submit periodic reports every four years to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee). At the time of consideration by the CEDAW Committee of the reports from the states parties, the NGOs are also submitting shadow reports and present their views to the Committee, actively providing the grassroots NGO’s analysis of the situation of women in the countries being examined. Several years ago, only a limited number of NGOs could participate in the CEDAW Committee’s sessions, but in recent years, it is a rule rather than an exception that the NGOs attend from almost all the countries under consideration by the Committee. The information provided by the NGOs to the experts of the CEDAW Committee is critical in assessing the progress in the implementation of the Convention and consequently adopting the most appropriate concluding observations on the states parties concerned. Of course, the women’s NGOs make good use of the concluding observations until the government’s submission of its next report and examination by the Committee next time around.

Regarding the CEDAW monitoring, the global-local connection for national NGOs was greatly enhanced by the dedicated efforts of international NGOs, in particular the Kuala Lumpur-based International Women’s Rights Action Watch-Asia Pacific (IWRAW-AP) founded in 1993. IWRAW-AP’s main objectives are to publicize and make use of the international human rights instruments, in particular the CEDAW Convention, and to assist women’s NGOs to assert their rights. The main activities of the IWRAW-AP have been giving trainings to the NGO representatives on the CEDAW Convention, including on how to write NGO shadow/alternative reports. It is also conducting programs to fund the national NGOs to physically attend the CEDAW sessions held in New York or Geneva and on-site training on how to best lobby the Committee. For the NGOs from the developing countries, outside technical and financial assistance as such has been essential in making the global-local connection. With

7 For NGO participation, see www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/NGO-Participation.final.pdf.
8 Information on IWRAW-AP can be found at www.iwraw-ap.org.
the presence of NGO representatives in the meeting room, the government delegation is pressured to be more transparent and accountable on what they say or promise to the Committee.

2.1.3 Representing the Local at the Global Stage

Another way of making the global-local connection for the women’s movement organizations was to find appropriate persons to delegate the grassroots situations and the NGO perspectives into the global stage. Starting from the newly installed position in 1994 of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, activists in the women’s movements lobbied the decision-making body for NGO representatives to be selected to the UN positions relevant to women’s rights whenever there was an opening. To send the right person to the global position, the women’s NGOs often times used an open method of signature collection in support of certain candidates. Within the political arena of UN diplomacy, the NGO efforts sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed. The strategy used in some cases was to propose strong candidates so that one of them could be chosen.

Once selected, whether the one they supported or not, the women’s NGOs also made efforts to bring the experts down to the local level to feed the information on the grassroots situation and issues to be raised. A good example is the cases of the special rapporteur on violence against women. At the time of each appointment of the special rapporteur, there have been submissions of names of the candidates and mobilization of NGO support for them from around the world. After the appointment, the NGOs also try to connect with the new special rapporteur. In Asian region, for example, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development has been hosting yearly consultations with the special rapporteurs, providing venues for the special rapporteur to listen to the voices of women on specific subjects the special rapporteur deals with in that year. The special rapporteur of course makes a good use of this kind of venues and incorporates the information in her reports to the UN Human Rights Council.

2.2 Human Rights NGOs Making the Global-Local Linkages

The efforts of the women’s NGOs to make the global-local linkages could be similarly observed in areas other than the women’s movements. Within the international human rights communities, there have also been endeavors for the human rights NGOs to actively engage in with the discussions and decisions at the global forum and connect them to the local situation. One of the most visible places of these global-local linkages is around the Universal Periodic Reviews of the UN Human Rights Council, which started anew in 2008. The national, regional and global human rights NGOs are using the new UPR system to highlight the human rights situation and issues of their concern. After the UPR process, the conclusions and recommendations of the Human Rights Council regarding the countries reviewed are also used by the human rights NGOs to mobilize pressure upon the governments to implement domestically.

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9 This year’s consultation with the new special rapporteur on violence against women is scheduled on 7-8 December in Bangkok on the theme of sexual and reproductive rights and violence against women. For information on APWLD, see www.apwld.org.

10 For information regarding the UPR, please check www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/UPRMain.aspx.
2.3 Global-Local Linkages and Social Progress

The activities of the civil society to make the global-local linkages, mostly by the NGOs but also by the academia and the media, have increased a great deal during the last decades. The efforts of the civil society to make these linkages between the global and the local are important. In all countries, but particularly in the developing countries, the domestic situation is far from the global standards, whether in the field of human rights, sustainable development, or other areas. The NGOs make use of the globally established standards to raise people’s awareness and to mobilize social pressure upon the government for domestic implementation of these standards. At the same time, the NGOs can directly engage with the UN with new ideas and policy suggestions which can be incorporated to improve the standards or can be used as an example of good practices. In an undemocratic society under an oppressive or unaccountable government, sometimes an international opinion with authority is more influential in changing government’s attitude or positions. The NGO’s publicity on the results of international scrutiny and evaluation by the UN and related agencies can be an effective way to challenge the government, which otherwise has no real intention of caring the well-being of the people in its jurisdiction.

3. Social Progress--Is It Possible without Women’s Equal Participation?

Without an exception, women in all societies experience discrimination and violence. Depending on the level of social progress, the forms of discrimination are varied, ranging from legal discriminations to indirect and cultural discriminations.

The UNDP Human Development Report\(^{11}\) includes Gender-Related Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure, which show the basic status of women in each country. The UNDP’s yearly report provides ranking in the levels of women’s development and women’s participation in decision-making positions. A more recent measurement of the status of women is the Global Gender Gap Report produced by the World Economic Forum. The Report provides index which benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, political, education- and health-based criteria and provides country rankings that allow for easy comparisons across regions and income groups, and over time. The Global Gender Gap Report uses index with underlying concepts of measuring gaps rather than levels, of capturing gaps in outcome variables rather than gaps in means or input variables, and of ranking countries according to gender equality rather than women’s empowerment. According to 2008 GGG Report, Norway ranks number one, with the GGG Index of 0.8239 with the smallest gap to the status of complete equality 1, while Yemen ranks the lowest, with the index of 0.4664, among the 130 countries.\(^{12}\) There is yet no country that women reached the same equal status with men.

If we take the issue of violence, it is more serious. Violence against women, in multiple forms, is prevalent in any country, ranging from female genital mutilation to acid throwing, from domestic violence to marital rape, from sexual harassment to trafficking. Sex and gender-based violence is

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widespread in developed countries also. The United Nations conducted an in-depth study on violence against women in 2006, which contains the calculation of the social cost of violence against women in some countries. The various surveys on the monetary costs of violence against women estimate social cost of up to billions of dollars per year, covering the cost of death, loss of productivity, direct medical costs, shelter and other services, etc.\textsuperscript{13}

When the half of the population suffers various forms of discrimination and violence, the social progress is deterred and delayed. Gender equality is not only an issue of human rights but of development and social progress. Besides, as often said, a progress for women is a progress for all. It is operative to remove the legal, cultural or other obstacles blocking women from fully developing their potential and fully utilizing their capabilities for themselves and for the whole societies.

4. Civil Society and Gender Equality

Although the NGOs in the civil society sector are composed of many different groups working on countless social issues, they all include women in their membership. Many NGOs have indeed a large number of female members, especially as volunteers, but as in any other government and business institutions, women are far less represented in the leadership positions in the NGOs. In fact, it is not easy to even find basic sex disaggregated data or studies on the situation of female members or their activities within the civil society.

Gender equality is now pursued by the UN and member states as a cross-cutting issue and as an obligation. Under the CEDAW Convention, gender equality is required in all fields in public institutions but also in any organizations. Also, the Beijing Platform for Action endorsed gender mainstreaming as the strategy to promote gender equality. For gender equality and gender mainstreaming, several factors are necessary—sex disaggregated data, gender analysis, gender impact assessment and gender-responsive budgeting.

While the goal of gender equality and the strategy of gender mainstreaming are actively pursued and monitored by the women’s NGOs, the monitoring is mainly regarding the government’s policies and programs, and in some limited ways, regarding the business enterprises. The civil society is left on its own to self-regulate the discriminatory nature of its programs or behaviours of its members. Thus, the traditional sexual division of labour between male and female members or low representation of women in the top positions is not perceived as problems and therefore continues or at least tolerated. At the same time, incidents of sexual harassment, even when the case is raised, are often intentionally blocked from being leaked to the outside.

If the civil society works to build a world of justice, peace, and sustainable development for everyone, it should also apply the principle of gender equality in its operation—organizationally as well as activity-wise. This would be a challenge for the civil society.

\textsuperscript{13} Report of the Secretary-General, In-depth study on all forms of violence against women, adopted by the UN General assembly in 61\textsuperscript{st} session in 2006, A/61/122/Add.1. See the Annex.