CHAPTER 1

The Status of Women Leaders in South Korea: Challenges and Opportunities

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The topic of women in leadership is gaining attention in South Korea (Korea, hereafter). Daily newspapers introduce women leaders who have succeeded in taking leadership positions in diverse sectors because such women are rare. Universities and public and private corporations provide leadership development programs, and create women leaders councils and committees to strengthen their voices and networking and learning opportunities. In politics, where local contexts require political activities that affect people's quality of life, women's leadership is in high demand. As local councils deal with everyday issues in the community and directly affect the quality of women's lives, women's representation in local councils is higher (22.9%) than in Congress (17%).

In both public and private sectors, a male-dominated, authoritative culture has been prevalent in Korea for a long time. However, as globalization has become a norm, a culture of diversity has become necessary to help society adapt to change. When faced with a competitive global market, companies are required to adjust their marketing strategies to correspond with ever-changing customer needs. As women's buying power has

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increased—women now make up 70%~80% of all consumer purchase decisions on home appliances, computers, cars, and houses—business strategies are expected to adjust to meet women buyers' needs.

Traditional male-dominated, paternalistic leadership is based on command and control, and is not effective in tackling challenges in an age of globalization. Among others, the most important task is to bring gender diversity into leadership so that organizations can be more agile and inclusive. Attention to women in leadership in Korea reflects such recent changes and demands. In this uniquely Korean context, we review the literature on women in leadership, discuss the status of women leaders in diverse sectors, examine challenges women leaders face in the gendered workplace, and introduce the government's women-friendly policies and programs designed to bring about more opportunities for women leaders.

Review of the Literature

The study findings of research undertaken on women in leadership in Korea since the mid-1980s are not as consistent as expected. Discussion on women in leadership (Chang, 2004; Kang, 1998, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2000) includes four research topics: women leaders, women's leadership, feminist leadership, and gender differences in leadership.

Women Leaders

Women leaders are defined as those women that take leadership roles. Interest in women leaders revolves around how many women have succeeded in taking leadership positions and what leadership styles women leaders bring in. Because men hold most leadership positions, leadership is understood as being related to male characteristics. The alienation of women from leadership affects the evaluation of women leaders. Kim and Kim (2000) emphasized that, to evaluate women leaders fairly, we need to examine the context they face because even when women leaders take the same leadership positions as men, their career paths and work experiences are fundamentally different from those of men.

Women's Leadership

Women's leadership means that leaders' behaviors and leadership styles reflect traits that are associated with women (Loden, 1985). Communication skills, caring, unauthoritative, and relational leadership styles are among

the characteristics of women's leadership; these characteristics are not necessarily inherent but, rather, are learned by socialization. To some extent, most women possess characteristics that are not necessarily attributes found only in women. An emphasis on women's leadership is prone to designate women as a single group, solidifying the dualism between men and women, and blindly advocating women's uniqueness.

Feminist Leadership

Feminist leadership does not focus on making a distinction between men and women but aims to recognize feminist values and to achieve the goal of those values through gender partnership. In feminist leadership, learning and growth through collaboration, empowerment of subordinates through participation and care, and transformational outcomes are encouraged (Martin, 1993). Yang (2007) examined possible contributions that the utilization of teams in the workplace bring to feminist leadership. Teams are known for making an organization's management possible as an individual organism, whereas traditional organizations are operated by the centralized command and control system. Teams' openness provides positive environments for increased women's power in the workplace. However, teams cannot guarantee women's power if team members do not share feminist values and a culture of gender equality. In this context, organizations are asked to integrate feminist leadership that values group members' relations and interactions in the current performance-based culture and system.

Gender Differences in Leadership

Kang (1998) examined the differences in leadership style of 51 managers in Korea. The study findings indicated that women in higher positions showed a male leadership style because women leaders felt pressured to act like men, who occupy a majority of leadership positions in the male-dominated workplace. Kim and Kim (2000) investigated how 600 men and women managers in 30 companies in Korea evaluated men's leadership and women's leadership. The study findings showed that the more men and women valued gender diversity, and the more they recognized that power as something they shared by collaboration and influence rather than control, the more they were positive about women managers. Men who had worked with women supervisors were also positive about women managers.

Gender differences in leadership are influenced by who evaluates leadership in the organization. The meta-analysis of 95 studies on leadership effectiveness undertaken by Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, and Woehr (2014) indicated that men considered themselves much more effective than women did. In addition, an organization's culture—whether an organization was male-dominated or female-dominated—mediated both genders' evaluation of leadership effectiveness. When organizations were male-dominated (e.g., the government), male leaders were evaluated as more effective, whereas in female-dominated fields (e.g., social services, education), women leaders were evaluated more positively. This study concluded that leadership style differences were generated not by nature but, instead, by socialization. Research also shows that when an organization's decision-making processes are based on gender diversity, this helps them succeed financially. Kang's (2014) recent study of 170 companies that had more than 500 employees and that were registered in the Korea Composite Stock Price Index (KOSPI), the representative stock market index of Korea, showed a positive correlation between the number of women managers and their organizations' financial performance, though small. The companies that had a higher number of women managers and executives between 2009 and 2013 had higher financial performance indices (e.g., return on sales (ROS), sales growth) than other companies.

The same study also compared companies that promoted women managers with companies that did not, and revealed that the companies that promoted women had a reduced decline in financial performance. For companies with no women managers during the period between 2009 and 2013, the ROS dropped from 1.69 to −2.81 (267% drop), whereas for companies whose rate of women managers increased in the same period, the ROS decreased from 3.64 to 2.39 (34% drop). The average drop of the ROS for all companies included in the analysis moved from 3.17 to 1.17 (63% drop). Although there could be many factors impacting companies' financial performance, the result of this study implied that one way to improve companies' financial performance would be to increase the number of senior women managers through the development of women managers. The study suggested that companies should collaborate with the government in order to prevent women experiencing career interruptions, most of which happen during the period after entering companies and becoming mid-level managers (Kang, 2014).

Women's Participation in the Labor Market

Although attention to women in leadership is increasing in global business markets, women's participation in the labor market in Korea shows a slow change. Korean women's economic participation is 51.3%, a rate 22.1% lower than male participation (73.2%) (Statistics Korea, 2015). Although investment in women's education has exponentially increased since the late 1990s, women's economic participation has not. For instance, the rate of female high school graduates' enrolling at college has more than doubled, from 32.6% in 1991 to 74.6% in 2014, but women's economic participation has only slightly increased during the same period, from 47.1% to 51.3% (Statistics Korea, 2015).

When we see gender differences in economic participation by education, the picture worsens. Both men and women with a college degree show higher economic participation than those who do not have a college degree. However, economic participation of women with a college degree is 64.4%, lower by 23.2% than that of men with a college degree (87.6%) (Statistics Korea, 2015). Given that gender differences in economic participation in developed countries narrow through education, Korea shows the opposite picture. Gender differences in economic participation increase by education, resulting in the largest difference in community college and college graduates (see Table 1.1). One possible reason behind the high participation rate for community college graduates may be due to the fact that community colleges in Korea provide education similar to that of vocational training institutes.

Table 1.1 indicates that women college graduates are not fully utilized in the labor market in Korea. One reason for the low economic participation of women concerns the career interruptions they experience; this is caused by marriage, childbirth, childcare, or household duties. Figure 1.1 shows women's economic participation rate by age groups. The rate of

Table 1.1 Gender differences in economic participation by education (%)

	Total	*Middle school graduation and below*	*High school graduation*	*Community college graduation*	*College graduation and above*
Women	51.8	34.0	55.5	67.1	64.4
Men	73.8	46.2	74.0	91.9	87.6
Gap	22.0	12.2	19.5	24.8	23.2

Note: All data are from Statistics Korea (2015)

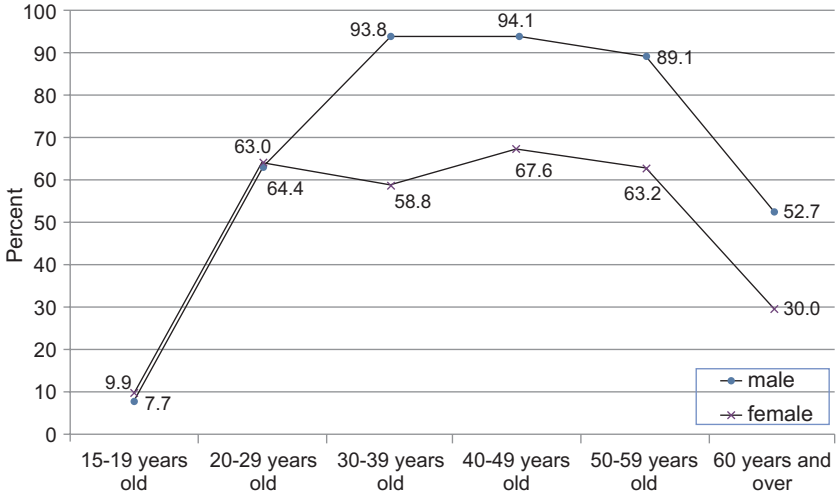

Fig. 1.1 Gender differences in economic participation rate by age
Source: Statistics Korea, 2015

women's economic participation is the highest among the age group 20–24 but decreases dramatically when women are in their late twenties and thirties, recovering in their forties.

Figure 1.1 shows gender differences in economic participation due to women's career interruptions. Women's economic participation rate is 64.4%, surpassing men's (63.0%) in their twenties, but this drops to 58.8% in their thirties. A survey of women who have experienced career interruptions (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2014) showed that women's career interruptions at the beginning of their thirties are attributable to marriage (45.9%), childcare (29.2%), maternity leave (21.2%), and children's education (3.7%). About half of the women surveyed responded that "marriage" was the major reason for their career interruption, indicating that women's place is in the home after marriage. After sending their children to school, many women attempt to reenter the labor market in their forties and older. However, most women have to settle for low-paid, hard-working jobs, as there are not many decent jobs for women in the age group.

Women college graduates' career interruptions are so severe that their reentrance to the labor market is extremely difficult. These women have high expectations of workplace conditions and salary levels, and want to work in full-time, professional jobs, but those jobs are limited to just a few. Gender differences in economic participation and career interruptions are critical issues for women, leading to the lack of women leaders in organizations in Korea.

Status of Women Leaders in Diverse Sectors

In this section, we examine the status of women leaders in public and private sectors, including political, government, education, and public and private corporations.

Political Sector

The number of women in Congress has steadily increased, from 5.9% in 2000 to 17.0% in 2016, since the application of a quota system in 2004. In local contexts, women politicians have also steadily increased, from 3.4% in 2002 to 22.9% in 2014 (see Table 1.2). Women's participation in local councils is particularly critical in increasing the number of women in politics and innovating local politics to become more people-centered (Lee, Kim, Moon, & Oh, 2014).

Table 1.2 Women's participation in congress and local councils

Year	*Total in congress*	*Women in congress*	*%*	*Total in local councils*	*Women in local councils*	*%*
2000	273	16	5.9	–	–	–
2002	–	–	–	4167	140	3.4
2004	299	39	13.0	–	–	–
2006	–	–	–	3621	525	14.5
2008	299	41	13.7	–	–	–
2010	–	–	–	3649	739	20.3
2012	300	47	15.7	–	–	–
2014	–	–	–	3687	845	22.9
2016	300	51	17.0			

Note: All numbers are from Statistics Korea (2015)

Government Administration and Legal Sector

As of 2014, women officials made up 49% of the total officials in central government and 31.5% in local government. Women leaders in mid-level positions made up 15.2% in central government and 9.7% in local government (Joo, Song, & Park, 2015). In contrast, women leaders occupied only 4.5% of all senior leadership positions in the government sector.

In 2015, 48.2% of those who passed the government's annual examination for government officials were women, 64.9% for diplomats, and 38.6% for the national bar. These numbers show that women candidates who passed the government's examinations made up rather high percentages. Even in the legal area, which used to be male-dominated, the proportion of women legal officials increased from 3.1% in 2000 to 21.7% in 2014, resulting in an increase of 18.6%. As a result, women comprise 27.3% of judges, 26.9% of prosecutors, and 19.9% of lawyers.

Education Sector

In 2015, 76.9% of elementary school teachers were women, as shown in Table 1.3.

However, the proportion of women teachers decreases as the school level advances, comprising 68.6% in middle school, 50.1% in high school, and 23.6% in college, including full-time lecturers and above. The proportion of female principals and vice-principals also decreases as the school level advances. In elementary school, women comprise 28.7% of principals and 54.3% of vice-principals; in middle school, 23.2% and 30.1%; and in high school, 9.5% and 11.3%. In college, the proportion of full-time women faculty has increased from 15.9% in 2000 to 23.6% in 2015; however, this represents a rather low representation given that the proportion of women college students comprises almost 50% of all students.

Public Corporations

The number of senior women leaders in public corporations is fewer than that in the government and in private corporations. According to *Yonhap News* (2016), as of September 2016, women workers in the 30 public corporations included 19.5% entry-level workers, 8.5% managers, and 1.9% managing directors. This means that a majority of women workers in

Table 1.3 Proportion of women teachers in schools (%)

	Elementary school teachers	*Principals*	*Vice-principals*	*Middle school teachers*	*Principals*	*Vice-principals*	*High school teachers*	*Principals*	*Vice-principals*	*College faculty*
2000	66.0	7.0	8.9	56.8	8.7	8.9	29.3	4.5	2.7	15.9
2015	76.9	28.7	54.3	68.6	23.2	30.1	50.1	9.5	11.3	23.6

Note: All numbers are from Korean Educational Development Institute (2000, 2015) and Ministry of Education (2000, 2015)

public corporations take low-level positions. Two women executives who took executive positions in 2014 have recently retired, resulting in no women in executive level positions in public corporations (Oak, 2016). The number of women managers who could be promoted to executive level in public corporations is only 0.1%. As a result, public corporations are known as "women executives' tombs" (Lee, 2015, para. 1).

Private Corporations

There are few women managers and executives in Korean companies. Women workers occupy 37.5% of all positions in companies employing more than 1000 and 35.6% in companies employing fewer than 1000. Women managers comprise 18.7% and 17.3%, respectively (Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2013). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the proportion of women managers in Korea is 11%, ranking 115th of 126 countries surveyed (*Asia Today*, 2015). The ILO report indicates that, despite Korea's economic success, the country's low rate of women managers is due to traditional gender roles that limit their participation in the labor market.

The Korea Corporate Governance Service, in a survey of 694 companies, found that only 78 companies (11.2%) had women executives (Kim & Eom, 2014). GMI Ratings, the leading independent provider of global corporate governance, also surveyed 5,977 companies in 45 countries to see how many women work as executives (Gladman, 2013). The survey revealed that the proportion of Korean women executives was only 1.5%, ranking second to the bottom after Japan (1.1%), and well behind China (8.4%).

Park (2015), based on a survey of 280 companies affiliated with the top 30 companies in Korea, revealed that only 76 companies (27.1%) had women executives. While women comprised 24.2% of all workers, women executives held only 1.83% (195) of a total of 10,647 executive positions. Of all women in executive positions, the majority were managing directors (59.4%), and 9.1% were senior managing directors and executive vice-presidents. Women executives work in marketing (27.1%), Information Technology (IT) (19.2%), planning (18.1), R&D (Research & Development) (12.4%), support roles (6.2%), and human resources (5.1%). As many women executives tend to be hired from outside the company as experts mostly in marketing, public relations (PR), and law, women workers inside the company are less likely to feel that they have the same opportunity to become executives.

Women Leaders' Challenges

Women leaders in Korea face many challenges in the gendered workplace, where they experience organizational and cultural constraints. In this section, we discuss challenges women leaders face in the workplace: gender inequality related to the glass ceiling, glass walls, and glass cliff; token status; limited behavior patterns; and work–life balance and career interruptions.

Gender Inequality

Glass ceiling. Glass ceiling was originally defined as something invisible but sufficiently strong to impede women's promotion to leadership positions despite their strengths and achievements (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987). Glass ceiling may lead to women having low self-worth and diminished expectations about their career success.

Korea ranked at the bottom among OECD countries by scoring 25 (average: 56) in the Glass-Ceiling Index created by *The Economist* (2016). The Glass-Ceiling Index is expected to show where women have the best chances of equal treatment at work, combining data on higher education, economic participation, pay, childcare costs, maternity leave, and representation in senior jobs. Based on this index, the proportion of Korean women senior managers (11%) and that of women on company boards (2.1%) were much lower than OECD averages.

Glass walls. Glass walls describe women's isolation and alienation caused by the gendered workplace (Rostollan & Levene, 2006). While glass ceilings are barriers to vertical promotions, glass walls are barriers to horizontal moves to functional divisions and departments. In Korea, men tend to have work experience in diverse functions, including planning, finance, accounting, and sales, whereas women lack such diverse experiences, particularly in core functions, and end up working in supporting functions. Women leaders who have been promoted in the male-dominated workplace do not have a variety of networking opportunities that men do; they easily become isolated and alienated in the organization.

Glass cliff. Glass cliff is defined as women's exposure to risk due to the unstable positions in which they are situated after being appointed to executive positions by breaking through glass ceiling (Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Frequently, women are asked to lead organizations in crisis where

options are very limited. Haslam and Ryan (2008) showed that men and women are appointed in different management environments that organizations face. For instance, under pressure of restructuring from the government, a woman in Korea was appointed as the CEO of a traditional, male-dominated public corporation that was faced with large financial debts and labor disputes. In this case, as the woman CEO faced a typical glass cliff situation, she ended up failing to complete her task.

Token Status

Korea's first woman Supreme Court Judge, Kim Young-Ran, once stated, "I always felt pressured to succeed because, if I fail, no women will be appointed again as a Supreme Court Judge." Her remark reflects women leaders' difficulty in being a token in the organization. Kanter (1977, 1993) explored how women's proportional representation in work groups affects their workplace experiences. Her findings revealed that women feel highly visible due to their token status; such high visibility creates performance pressures as a result of which they usually either overachive or become socially invisible in order to avoid unwanted attention. As dominants (men) tend to exaggerate their commonalities with and differences from token women, these women feel isolated. In addition, women attempt to assimilate to men by the use of stereotypes regarding the social category of token women, which tend to be distorted to fit the dominants' generalization (Gustafson, 2008). Most women in male-dominant jobs experience token status, whereas men in female-dominant jobs do not have such negative experiences (McDonald, Toussaint, & Schweiger, 2004), indicating that the token status applies to gendered stereotypes in the workplace.

Limited Behavior Patterns

Many women leaders in Korea feel frustrated because of adverse social stereotyping. When they act like a female, they are judged as being too soft to be a leader. When women are honest about their feelings, they are evaluated as being too emotional to make a distinction between public and private matters. On the contrary, when women take initiatives as leaders, they are criticized as being too aggressive. In this context, women face negative evaluations because their leadership styles do not accord with

typical gender stereotypes. Women, therefore, are asked to act out limited behaviors and are not allowed to use Machiavellian political strategies because that does not correspond to typical female characteristics of being soft and innocent (Park, 2012).

Work–Life Balance and Career Interruptions

Due to women's career interruptions, their economic participation pattern shows an M-curve pattern (see Fig. 1.1). Only 16.7% of women who returned to work took full-time jobs, 9.1% part-time jobs, and 15.9% voluntary work (Oh, Min, & Lim, 2009), meaning that, following career interruptions, women's reentrance to the job market is extremely difficult in Korea. Even in cases of successful reentrance, women's jobs tend to be lower than they held before in terms of salary levels and positions. Kim and Lee's (2011) study revealed that women's career interruptions caused wage and income loss by 21.9% from the previous wage and income, reaching 28% for women with a high level of education (college and above). The government has helped women who want to reenter the labor market receive vocational training and placement services, but Kim and Lee's study showed that only 12.5% of those women benefited from the services, indicating that there is a strong need for the expansion of such services for more women needing support.

Major reasons for women's career interruptions lie in the lack of support in their work–life balance. Although the views of younger generation males regarding childcare and household duties have slightly changed, the foremost role for women is still considered to be housework, due to the traditional gender divide in the family. For example, while women spend 3.8 hours per day performing household duties, men spend only 0.7 hours, the least time among the OECD countries (Miller, 2016).

In order to prevent the loss of female talent, many companies implement programs to support a healthy work–life balance, such as flextime, maternity/paternity leave, and a family day. However, only women take advantage of those programs. The number of men who take paternity leave for childcare is slowly increasing but paternity leave comprises only 4.4% of all leaves taken by men due to negative images and the possible impact of paternity leave on promotion and salary. For example, Hong's (2014) recent survey of 1,000 male workers revealed that 64% were interested in taking paternity leave, but only 2% actually used the program.

In this context, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (2016) has enacted a family-friendly corporation certification system, but the rate of certification is low. In addition, the common practice of long hours of work damages work–life balance in Korea. Policies should provide both men and women with opportunities to strike a balance between work and life.

Opportunities for Women Leaders

We are living in times when innovation and creativity are in high demand, but Korea is still rooted in authoritative hierarchies, a paternalistic culture, and male-dominated workplaces. Recent research on the organizational health and climate of Korean companies by the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) and the McKinsey Consulting Company (2016) examined Korean corporate culture when facing challenges in a period of low growth. In the survey of 40,951 employees from 100 companies, women employees' evaluation using nine indices of organizational health was strikingly low compared with their male counterparts, meaning that women face unhealthy situations and practices in the organization. In order to promote women's leadership positions, organizations should make extra efforts to develop women's leadership skills and competencies, and to improve their organizational culture so that it could be more gender-inclusive and women-friendly. To that end, organizations should eliminate barriers to women's promotion to senior leadership positions by adding a gender diversity index in key performance indicators (KPI) and provide (gender) diversity training to the management team (team leaders and above) so that all managers can make better decisions on promotions and leadership development opportunities as well as performance appraisals.

In this context, women leaders should bring in both descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to increasing the number of women leaders in organizations, while substantive representation requires that leadership undergo fundamental transformation in ways that incorporate women's experiences and perspectives. It is important to remove barriers to women taking leadership roles without any discrimination in their career paths. Women's promotion to leadership roles will further gender diversity in the male-dominated workplace, leading to an organization's competitive advantage in the long run. In this context, organizations are called upon to create an organizational

climate and culture that embrace diversity and inclusion as part of their employees' organizational life. For example, Hanwha and Kolon, two large companies in Korea, have recently provided diversity training for team leaders so they can take an active role in promoting diversity in their organization.

Efforts have been made to increase the number of women leaders in various sectors. In order to raise women's representation in politics, the government provides an incentive through financial support to political parties whose candidates comprise more than 30% of women. In addition, in order to develop women's leadership, gender-balanced job assignments, alternating administration jobs, and training for women officials are in place. Public corporations, such as government-affiliated organizations, have a lower level (13.9%) of women managers than private corporations (19.2%). The government plans to increase the number of women managers to 23.6% by 2017 through the goal setting and performance evaluation of 303 public corporations (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2016).

In higher education, the government plans to implement a target for women faculty hire with the intention of increasing the number of women faculty in national and public universities; complying universities will be provided with incentives while underperforming universities will receive consulting services. The government is also setting a target figure for women principals and vice-principals in K-12 schools (36% by 2017) (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2016). With regard to the police and the military, the government will increase the number of women police officers and soldiers to be hired and promoted, and will also increase the number of women students in police academies. In order to avoid gender discrimination, the government will monitor the pregnancies of women soldiers and police personnel and resignation before and after delivery.

In 2014, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the World Economic Forum and created a task force called Gender Parity and Empowerment of Women. The task force was formed to narrow the gender gap and to provide member companies and public corporations with a forum and consulting services for developing female talent and senior women leaders. The government also established an academy for women talent in the Korean Institute for Gender Equality Promotion and Education to provide leadership training programs for women managers in public and private sectors.

Conclusion

Although a variety of policies and programs for women's promotion to leadership positions have been implemented, these initiatives have not yet brought an expected impact. A major reason for this lack of impact is that the initiatives were not based on a long-term framework aimed at incorporating gender diversity and gender equality in society but, rather, were focused on generating a quick fix. The current male-dominated leadership, therefore, should be charged to promote gender diversity and gender equality—though this inclusive leadership may be challenging to Korea's hierarchical structure and traditional culture, which emphasize the gender divide in male-dominated leadership practices.

Women leaders in Korea are asked to overcome the double bind generated from their identities as leaders and as women in order to take leadership roles. Both short-term and long-term efforts for the development of women's leadership are called for. Further research is needed to investigate women's leadership experiences so as to theorize them in a meaningful way. In practice, the barriers women leaders face, including individual and contextual factors, should be identified and overcome through the implementation of a variety of women-friendly policies and programs that are sustainable.

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