Female Constituency, Electoral Competition, and Local Maternity Policy in Korea

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Abstract: This study explores the dynamic nature of maternity policy formation by focusing on the role of the female constituency and electoral competition in rendering policy makers, regardless of their gender, more receptive to the interests of women. The study utilizes original data on maternity policy benefits collected from local governments in Korea. The results show that a strong female constituency and intense electoral competition can lead local policy makers to establish greater maternity benefits. These findings suggest that the electoral power of women in the citizenry and the political vulnerability of elected officials constitute alternative channels for female influence on the formation of local maternity policy in Korea.

Keywords: gender, female constituency, electoral competition, maternity policy

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely accepted that female representation in policy-making institutions and bureaucratic agencies is the most important condition for the formulation and implementation of public policies that benefit female citizens. One strand of this representative government theory has examined the link between the gender of elite policy makers and legislative outcomes (Dolan & Ford, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999; Swers, 2005). Legislative institutions with greater numbers of female lawmakers are expected to produce more woman-friendly policies. The other strand of the theory has

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focused on the effect of the gender makeup of bureaucratic organizations on policy implementation (Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). Bureaucratic agencies with greater numbers of female officials are expected to better serve the needs of female citizens. Furthermore, studies have found that the translation of female representation into women-friendly policy outcomes is contingent upon women’s power within policy-making institutions (Swers, 2005), the salience of a policy issue to women’s interests (Dolan, 2000), the feminist mission of an agency (Kelly & Newman, 2001), and flexible organizational arrangements that allow bureaucratic discretion (Keiser et al., 2002).

There is no doubt that this gender-based theory of representative government has clarified important institutional conditions under which the interests of women can be promoted by female officeholders. Yet, the theory is still limited in the following respects. First, in focusing on the gender profile of government institutions, researchers tend to downplay the political role played by female citizens in the policy process. Especially in policy areas where beneficiaries are largely drawn from the female population, female constituency groups act to pressure elected officials (Allard, 2004; Dolan, 1997; Howard, 1992; Skocpol, 1995). Therefore, female representation in political inputs may also make a substantial difference in the extent to which elected officials act for female interests in the policy process.

Second, the gender-based theory of representative government has sidelined the important question of when policy makers, regardless of their gender, become more receptive to female interests. This weakness becomes evident as we critically examine the premise that the gender of a policy maker is the principal determinant of his or her positions on matters that directly affect female interests. Contrary to the conception of a gender divide in public decisions, support for female interests can differ not only across genders but also among individuals of the same gender due to factors that cross-cut the gender divide, such as political predisposition, race, and class (Mouffe, 1995; Pateman, 1989). Because not all male officials are less sympathetic than their female counterparts to the interests of women, the question of what motivates policy makers to take a favorable position on gendered issues warrants more cautious examination.

To add to our knowledge about causal links between gender representation and policy outputs, this study examines some alternative mechanisms of female influence in the policy process: the strength of female constituency and the electoral incentives of government officials. First, when policy benefits are disproportionately concentrated on the female population, female constituency groups are likely to form and exert a significant influence on decisions by elected policy makers. Second, when a highly contested election is anticipated, the incumbent policy makers may weigh female